



Cake, Please!

BeyondStarlight

Chapter 1

Like many things in James' life, it had started as just a game – *"I dare you to kiss the prettiest person in the room."* – and then it had, most naturally, evolved into just another joke.

"If you want to kiss me so badly you could have just asked, Sirius."

It didn't strike him as odd, that he thought of Sirius first. They laughed and cheered, and then he leant forward and felt the warmth Sirius' smirk right underneath his lips. There was something inherently different about kissing a boy. Not something he could put to words, but whatever it was, it made him a little light-headed. He drew back with a breathless smile and flicked the tip of his tongue of his lips.

Things became gradually more different from thereon. He caught himself staring at Sirius' lips when they were talking. He knew now why some girls deemed him the best kisser. With a body that showed thorough Quidditch exercise, a jawline that could cut someone, and lips like those, James could hardly understand why he didn't have girls swarming around him. Even over the past few years, there had been only a handful of girlfriends. Just when James began to speculate that maybe Sirius was not all that interested in girls, he remembered the magazines they passed around in the boys dormitories, and cut off that train of thought.

Somewhere along the way, he noticed Remus' habit of biting his lip whenever he was deep in thought. They were actually fuller and even softer looking than Sirius', but Remus kept his romances private and brief, unconvinced that anyone would love him if they knew his secret. His breath always smelled like mint too. Once or twice, he had felt the sudden urge to kiss him, just to find out whether it tasted minty too.

One late night, he wondered whether Peter would have kissed him, and not Sirius, if he had gotten the same dare. He spent the entire next day speculating on what the chances were of Peter choosing him over Sirius; purely hypothetically, of course. Then he realised Peter would have kissed a *girl*, and he stopped thinking about that particular scenario altogether.

Except for the odd though and quickly suppressed impulse, nothing changed much. Until, of course, Snivellus had to make things worse.

Peter had overheard that Lily liked to have a stroll outside after dinner, so that's where he was. Unfortunately, the outside part around Hogwarts was rather huge, and he was wandering around without success. When he heard the unmistakeable voice of his favourite Slytherin, he halted. Snape was talking with some tall blond guy, who was a few years older. Malfoy. They were talking in low, hushed voices, and though he strained himself, there was little he could make out of it. Fortunately for him, there was another opportunity for mischief lying innocently at Snape's feet. His bag.

He slipped into his invisibility cloak and tiptoed towards them. Neither noticed an invisible hand reaching for the bag, nor how the old thing itself suddenly became invisible. Once he was at enough of a distance, James chuckled, shrugged off the cloak, and made a run for it.

In the middle of running, of course, he spotted Lily. He turned his head so fast his neck cracked, and then he stumbled and fell rather inelegantly, only a few feet away from her. Aware that she would recognize Snape's bag, he stayed right where he was, hiding it underneath his own body.

Lily and Alice glanced at him in surprise, and then hid their grins behind their hands.

"Hey Evans," he greeted her, "I've fallen for you once again."

"Pretty badly, too." Alice muttered through her smile, and Lily elbowed her.

"Really, Potter, you are ridiculous," she shook her head at him, but there was no real mockery in her voice.

He found himself somewhat disappointed with her softened reaction. She used to make a big deal out of everything, until she worked herself up to the point where it seemed her whole world revolved around him and how much of an asshole he was. A genius asshole, he would hear her say between the lines. On a good day, she would even throw a few innocent hexes in his way.

"See you at tomorrow's Quidditch training?"

She pursed her lips. "Maybe. Don't get your hopes up."

He left them with mixed feelings, trying to come up with some grand scheme that would bring back the good old dynamics between them. Or maybe she could be on their side next time, part of the plotting and executing of what could be the world's best prank. With Lily on their side, that could be grand spectacle.

His thoughts were cut short when he, bag and invisibility cloak stowed underneath his own cloak, passed one of the unused classrooms; one which he knew opened with a simple Alohomora. Once inside, he finally took out Snape's bag, which weighed far heavier than any bag had a right to. The contents were unceremoniously dumped onto the floor. He kept shaking the bag, until even the bottom came loose and fell out. Satisfied, he sat down, and his hands rummaged daftly through the mess. There was a half-empty inkwell that had broken when it had fallen, and was now leaking all over what he guessed was a second-hand transfiguration book. He carefully picked up a clearly worn quill between his thumb and index finger, wondering what sickly chicken had given its feather for that thing. In a coverless notebook, Snape had scribbled unnecessarily detailed potion descriptions. James' eyes were far too tired to decipher more than a few lines at a time, but it all appeared to be school-related either way. Other than that, he was disappointed to find only clean parchment, text books and a library book.

His initial reaction was to abandon the whole ordeal. On first glance, there wasn't anything worth having or using. Since he had gone through the effort of retrieving it, though, he might as well skim through the books to chance an embarrassing side note. Or maybe he could write some messages himself in there for Snivellus.

The biggest book, which was the library book, lied closest by. It had a cover that must have once been smooth leather, but was now dull and torn. The letters printed on it were faded and unreadable, but the first page introduced it to be '*A Collection of Folklore and Tales concerning the prevalence of Ancient Runes in Nordic lower class Society*'. Just reading that made him yawn. He picked it up by the front cover alone, causing the spine of the book to tear a little further, and, more importantly, a few thin papers to fall out. They were flimsy and folded and coloured, clearly not part of the book they had been hidden in. James dropped the heavy volume and picked up the nearest paper.

It was folded in half. The back side showed only small-printed text, which he didn't bother to read. The inside showed the picture of a man, head to hips. He wasn't wearing clothes, showing his muscular chest and arms. The picture cut off just below the belt, and his eyes briefly lingered on the empty space where his junk would have been. The man had one hand there, also out of the picture, as though he was coving himself. His mouth was slightly parted and his eyes hazy-

Oh.

He stared at the picture, not sure whether he was really looking at what he thought he was looking at. His cheeks grew hot, and he glanced over his shoulder at the closed door. While putting it down, he picked up his wand and magically locked the door as well.

For a long moment, he simply stared at the picture that lied before him. They had plenty of pictures of women doing this sort of thing. The poses, the parted lips, the blush and the bedroom eyes. But they were *women*. They always were.

He picked up the second one.

He blinked a few times, as though he knew he shouldn't look at it, yet his eyes opened every time again and eagerly darted over the picture. This time, there were two men, and they had not cut the picture off anywhere above the belt. James realised, belatedly, that the pictures weren't moving. They were still, like muggle pictures, and nothing about the men indicated anything wizardly. They were lying on a bed, one man's mouth around the other's cock, one's hand's in the other's hair. James imagined how maybe, just after this picture had been taken, the man would have come inside the mouth of the other one, and a sudden heat welled up in his abdomen.

He put it down, but his mind raced to the next thought before he could stop it, and he thought of how it would feel to have another man around his own cock. A tingling sensation rushed through his abdomen again, and he shuddered.

There was one more picture. He knew he shouldn't look. He knew he had already pushed it too far, and that everything would have been better if he hadn't found the pictures at all. But he also knew that he would do it either way.

The third picture had a man lying on his back, legs spread in such a way that James was looking directly at his erection, and worse still, the butt cheeks he was spreading invitingly. The sheer indecency made his face hot, and his penis gave an embarrassing twitch. This man was slim and small, with curly blonde hair and an almost innocent look. With his free hand, James slowly touched himself through his robes, feeling his half-erect penis and shuddering at the sensation.

The expression on the man's face suddenly reminded him of all those girls he had seen, in the magazine's that frequently went around the boy's dorm. He wondered suddenly whether those pictures had made the others feel like he was feeling now. Whether their penis roused just at the sight of a girl spreading her legs. Like his did now, at the sight of a bloke.

A bloke. He was turned on by a bloke.

He shot up, throwing the paper away as though it had bitten him. It twirled away from him as smoothly and innocently as a leaf. *Snape*, he thought. It was all his fault. He glanced again at the mess lying at his feet. It would be the end of Snape if he brought his filthy, disgusting fascination with men out into broad daylight. It would ruin any status he had with his Slytherin friends. And it would definitely make Lily reconsider their friendship.

It was just before curfew when he returned to the common room. Peter and Sirius were engaged in an intense game of chess, whilst Remus had apparently retired early due to a headache. James sat down next to them, watching the board but unable to make anything out of it. His mind jumped back and forth erratically to the picture of the blonde man, whose expression he recalled in as much detail as his erection.

"You missed out on our trip to the kitchen," Peter muttered, and handed him a candy bar without

averting his eyes from the game. When James didn't reply, he shot him a quick glance. "You alright, Prongs?"

James hummed in response and shifted, trying to sit more comfortably. His body felt hot and knotted up. He tried to distract himself, but the game couldn't bother him, so he glanced at Sirius, catching him worrying his lip as he pondered his next move. Whenever he tried to formulate what he had found, his guts would twist, and his cheeks would burn, until Sirius paused and put his hand on James' forehead.

"He doesn't look good, does he, Wormtail?"

The two of them turned away from the board game, glancing James up and down, much to the latter's distress. "It's tomorrow's Quidditch training," he sputtered.

Peter snorted, and he shared a look with Sirius. "And since when does that work you up?"

"Since," James shrugged, and licked his lips, "Since Lily's coming to watch."

"Oooh," they said in unison, both grinning. Sirius patted him on his back, most proudly. "Our little James is finally going to score himself a girlfriend."

Chapter 2

Like many things in Severus' life, it had started as just a lie – "*I'm not in love with you.*" – and then it had, most naturally, evolved into just another problem.

"Don't play dumb, Severus, it doesn't suit you." Lucius gave him a patient look, which, most ironically, made him look as though he were speaking to someone particularly dull.

Severus liked to think of himself as a good liar – it was just hard to lie to a better liar. It was a tough situation too, because despite staring at him from behind the curtain of his hair, he had never actually been alone with Lucius. Now he was trying to come across convincingly uninterested in Lucius' beautiful, grey eyes and the little smirk that curled his lips.

Lucius also happened to be most skilled in seduction. Unlike what he had expected, it didn't matter that he *knew* what Lucius was doing. His heart still leapt when Lucius leant in a little close, licking his lips as if it was an unconscious act. He spoke in a warm, low voice. "You mustn't fall in love with me."

"I'm not."

As soon as the words had been said, he regretted them. Worse still was that he couldn't look away when Lucius smirked, afraid that it would be taken for surrender. There was a familiar glint in his eyes that consisted of very little sympathy and a lot more superiority.

"Now, Severus, I think of you as a friend, of course, so I won't tell anyone."

It was bad. They had reached the point where Lucius would think he could demand anything from him, in return for silence. There was only one thing left to do, and that was denial. "There's nothing to tell."

"Of course not." Lucius winked, put his delicate hand on Severus' shoulder, and leant in a little closer. Severus held his breath. "I like you, and I know I'm not the only one who sees that there's more to you."

Severus glanced away. Nothing could make him break his stare as quickly as flattery. That's all it was, after all, meaningless flattery. Still, Lucius' silky voice continued. "If you behave like a pureblood, you'll get away with your little *flaw*." The flaw being his blood, he reminded himself, not the warmth currently curling in his abdomen or the skin tingling where Lucius' fingers rested. "Not everyone cares about where you came from. It's been done before. Besides, a smart man like you will sooner or later wrap a pretty girl around his finger, and then all you have to do is marry your way into our society."

He tried to paint the picture in his mind. Him, in a mansion, wearing silk and velvet robes that even Lucius would compliment. And a wife, perhaps even kids. It was a ridiculous thing to imagine. Not that he hadn't tried before. He swallowed, his mouth dry, and shrugged off Lucius' hand. "I know what I'm doing."

"Good," Lucius stepped back, gave him one last dazzling smile. "Don't make a fool out of yourself."

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"Has anyone seen my bag?"

In the common room chaos of the early morning, Severus' voice didn't carry very far. The room was brimming with students who were leaving for breakfast, none sparing him as much as a glance. "Lucius." He grabbed him by his sleeve. Lucius looked, very briefly, as if he was going to snarl, but then his face smoothened. "Do you remember whether I had my bag with me yesterday?"

"No idea."

Once in the Great Hall, he thrummed his fingers on the table, staring at the toast and eggs on his plate. In his mind, he reconstructed yesterday's evening, trying to locate his bag in each memory. It had been there in the library, when he had struggled with fitting in the book on ancient runes, nearly crushing his notebook in the process. It had also been with him in the empty restroom, where he had had a lonesome wank, but that was not a memory he liked to focus on. He thought, though he wasn't quite sure, that he had taken it outside with Lucius, but if he had taken it out he must have taken it back in. It was a hideously large eye-sore, and he couldn't imagine not noticing it when he tripped over it nearly every morning.

As he wandered through the mostly empty library, his doubts began making him nervous. He couldn't possibly have lost all of it. His only bag, with his the one good quill he had, his last ink well, his notebooks, his transfiguration text book, and the library book.

"Lily?" his voice was softer than he'd meant it to sound. A look of concern crossed her face, and he quickly straightened himself. "Have you seen my bag?"

She gave him that pitying look that made his guts twist. He wished he hadn't asked.

"No. You should try looking where you had it with you last time." She paused a moment, and they both looked anywhere but at each other. She licked her lips and said, slowly, "I was going to go watch the Quidditch practice, but if you want me to help you,"

Two of her friends were standing a few feet away from them, and their hushed voice and unsubtle glances punctured their silence. Lily clenched her jaw, looking as though she wanted to swivel around and tell them off. He wondered whether she'd tell them off for what they were saying, or for saying it in Severus' presence.

"No." He shrugged. He told himself he would have said no either way, and stiffly moved away when he realised she wasn't going to say anything anymore. "I'll find it."

As he paced through the hallways, he began feeling a little panicky. Half of his stuff had gone missing. He tried to pass all routes he usually took, hoping to catch a glimpse of it somewhere. To top it off, everyone else had the audacity to be having a nice day.

When he finally reached the front doors, the panic had settled in well. He pushed open the heavy doors and cursed at someone for slipping through before him. The cold morning wind blew sharply into his face. He remained frozen at the top of the stairs, limbs suddenly too heavy to move and head too light to think. Far down, on the edge of the lake, white blots and squares were floating quietly in the water.

He moved, mechanically, towards the lake, every bit of his body grinding against itself. People were staring when he rolled up his sleeves, but whatever embarrassment he had dissolved in the icy water. For a few minutes, he could think only of curling his numb fingers around whatever could be saved. His parchment fell apart in his hands, and he pulverized a handful of it in his fist before throwing it away. Most of his books were waterproofed. The transfiguration textbook was the only one that wasn't, and the ink leaked out of the book and stained his arms and shirt. He stared at the blackish smudges and lines that ran across his arm and dropped the book back into the lake. Part of

him wanted to drown right there, but not with all the others staring at him, snickering behind their hands. When he had gathered most of it, and held the soaked mass tightly to his chest, he moved towards the land again. A cord tangled around his ankle, and he tipped for an alarming moment before regaining his balance. Dipping one arm again into the water, he picked up his bag from the bottom, cutting his thumb on a shard of his inkwell in the process.

He stepped out of the lake slowly, shivering violently and ignoring the pointing fingers. His fingers were turning white and blue, pressing his stuff tightly to his chest. He was numbed from his toes to his knees, and every step felt like walking on needles. His robes were heavy, dragging at his feet and leaving a trail of water and dirt where he walked.

Breakfast was still going on. He was too embarrassed to pass the Great Hall on his way to the Hospital Wing, so he took the shortcut to the dungeon. Once in the safety of his empty room, he stowed his books and bag underneath his bed. His legs were burning with the heat of the castle, and he considered undressing and staying in bed the entire day. Unfortunately, they had a transfiguration test coming up, and he needed a valid excuse not to attend.

Madam Pomfrey gave him a hard look. "Oh Merlin, another one who thinks he can get away with this. Let me tell you something, young man, every year a handful of students think they can get away with a plunge into the lake. Whether it was a dare, or you want to skip classes, I don't care. It's irresponsible, downright irresponsible."

She continued to talk, but the words became blurry and meaningless. Severus slipped into the bed and pulled the covers up to his nose. His hands and feet were just cold by then, and he curled up to keep some warmth. The sheets trembled with magic for a moment, and then became so hot it almost hurt. Slowly, the nagging buzz of Madam Pomfrey's voice became his own mother's, and he fell asleep thinking he was home.

The first thing he took notice of when he woke up again, was that his nose was stuffed, and his head felt heavy with snot and a throbbing headache. Then he noticed that what had woken him. A few students were gathered around one of the other beds, talking noisily and paying him no mind. He blinked a few times, and glared at their backs, recognising the all too familiar red-and-gold colours of the Gryffindor house. He quickly regretted glaring, because Black looked over his shoulder, and smirked.

"We heard that you found your bag just fine, Snivelly."

For a moment, he thought he would storm out of his bed, and wipe off the smirk with his own fist. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, just raising his head made his vision swim and a wave of coldness roll over him. He shuddered, repressed a cough, and stubbornly kept glaring. It resulted in a shared chortle between the Gryffindor students.

"That's it, boys." Madam Pomfrey waltzed into the room with a slim bottle and a glass of water. "Give your friend some rest now. He should be fine by the time the next Quidditch practice comes around."

They complained, but left one by one, until Severus finally spotted Potter, one bed empty away from him, with both his arms covered in bandages. Madam Pomfrey fed him three spoons of the silvery liquid, held the cup of water for him to empty, and left whilst muttering something reassuring.

The door closed behind her, and Severus was ready to make some scathing remark. However, as soon as he said "You," he faltered, surprised by how nasal his voice sounded. To make it worse, Potter burst out in a fit of laughter before Severus could attempt to finish his sentence.

Potter managed to stop laughing unnecessarily loudly, and turned his head to face him properly. Although he was unable to pinch his nose, he mimicked his voice disturbingly well. "Nice to see you too, Snivelus."

Severus glanced him up and down. A lone Potter with two useless arms was decidedly the best Potter he'd yet faced. His chances of winning a physical fight were significantly higher, which raised his moods regardless of whether or not he would actually attempt it. It was too bad that Madam Pomfrey, who was in her little office, could probably hear them just fine. She also wasn't too keen on Severus, so she probably wouldn't tolerate him trying to strangle a fellow student.

Severus also remembered, as he glanced back at Potter's face, that he'd rather endure his own nasal voice than silence. "You've got a big mouth for someone who can't use their arms."

"Don't worry about that." He winked, sounding far too pleased with himself. "I could beat you with my foot if I had to."

Severus rolled his eyes and snorted, or at least he tried to. It sounded more like chocking, the way his nose had it. His head was beginning to throb worse, and he considered lying back down, but because Potter could mistake it for surrender, he remained leaning on one elbow. "If you say so."

"I just did," Potter replied evenly, and then he smiled all too sweetly. "I'm glad you've got all your stuff back though."

Severus' hands were clenched into fists, holding onto the bedsheets as though it would help. "You fucking-"

"Watch your language."

"Don't tell me what to do," Severus hissed.

"Actually," Potter said, his grin stretching widely. "I think I can do just that."

The throbbing of his headache became more pronounced with each word, until Severus reluctantly leaned back onto his pillow. He forced himself to take a deep breath. Though he tried to sound cold, he sounded bitter, at best (and miserable, at worst). "You think you're better than everyone, don't you?"

"Sort of, yeah, but that's beside the point." Potter yawned loudly, and then stretched whatever he could stretch lazily, as though he were having a casual conversation. He was merrily unaware of Severus' inner debate on his chances of getting away with murder. "I was thinking that, since I can't use my arms, you should feed me."

Severus slowly turned his head to him. Oh, how he'd love to poison that boy.

"There's some cake in my bag, how about you get me that."

Severus, seeing that the only other occupant of the hospital wing was currently violently vomiting, properly keeping Madam Pomfrey busy, didn't even answer. Instead, he carefully got up, ignoring the brief spell of dizziness, and picked up James' bag. His hands were surprisingly steady, scooping the bag up from the floor effortlessly. "Do you even go to classes? There's hardly anything in here," he muttered, half to himself. There was, however, a slice of cake, wrapped in many tissues. It didn't matter that he was nauseous, because the satisfaction of eating Potter's cake would be worth it, even if it would make him sick later.

"I think you might want to reconsider whatever you're thinking, and give that to me."

There was something unpleasantly calm about Potter's voice. Severus slowed down, trying not to show his hesitation. "And why is that?"

"I went through your stuff before I threw it in the lake."

The cake hit James' face with enough force to surprise the both of them. "You just wait," he hissed, "I know just what I'll be doing with your bag."

What made everything worse, was that he knew that it didn't matter. Potter would sooner have a new bag and school supplies than dive into the lake to fetch whatever leftovers there were. Only Severus was as pathetically poor to do that. He clutched onto the bag, ready to tear it apart with his teeth if he had to.

"I saw the pictures you hid in the arithmancy book."

"What bloody pictures?" he snapped.

Potter leaned forward, idly picking at the crumbs in his hair, and enunciated every word slowly and clearly. "The ones you hid in that big old book about runes or something."

"I don't know-"

Oh.

He realised, too late, that he had made a mistake in cutting himself off. He still continued, coolly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know," James purred, "There's the one with the blond guy," and he spread his legs slightly. Severus' cheeks were burning, and he looked away pointedly. "My, my, Snape, you're going to give yourself away so easily once I tell the others."

"I hate you," he gritted through his teeth.

Potter laughed, but it was cut short when he moved his arm and sucked in his breath through his teeth. He settled down again more comfortably. "Well, it doesn't have to be like this."

"Are you going to blackmail me? Really?" Severus inhaled slowly, evening his voice. "Are you sinking that low?"

Potter chuckled, but there was nothing joyful about the sound. "I've seen a lot worse coming from your side."

"So you're just like us then," he snarled.

"I'm not an asshole like you," Potter replied defensively. "I'm my very own kind of asshole."

Severus thought for a moment that this was just a bad, feverish dream, but no matter how much he willed Potter's smile, ingenuine and cold, to go away, it remained perfectly in place. With a long sigh, which he could feel coming from the depths of his chest, he lied back down, and turned his back to him. He closed his eyes, waiting for the world to disappear, or at least for sleep to come.

"I'm still hungry, you know."

He didn't move, squeezing his eyes shut, trying to shut out the noise as well.

"You could get me some food, to start with."

Maybe, if he lied still long enough, Potter would just grow bored. Yeah, fat chance. He resigned himself quietly to another torturous day while staring unblinkingly at the wall.

"I was trying to be nice, you know, just ask you to feed me, but if you want to go straight to the part where I blackmail you into every little thing then we can do that too."

Severus shot up. His headache roared up immediately as well. He threw the sheets off, which fell on the floor, and walked straight out of the Hospital Wing. Potter called after him with a voice rich in triumph. "Cake, please!"

Severus almost ran to the dungeons. He prayed no one had seen him, barefooted and uncloaked, hurrying through the hallways and into the blissfully empty common room. He slipped into his room and curled up in his bed.

Soon after lying down, he realised that sleep was further away than ever. Instead of drifting off, his mind began creating worst-case scenarios en masse. One moment he felt nauseous imagining Lucius' cold disappointment. *Don't make a fool out of yourself*, and then he'd gone and blown it all up the morning after. He grew dizzy thinking of the speed with which he would be snapped out of the community he had been trying to become part of for months on end. All the ass kissing he had gone through, for nothing. What really twisted his gut was imagining Lily. Maybe she wouldn't believe it. Just another pathetic lie they made up for attention. But what if she did? What if everyone else in Gryffindor believed it – and they would – and she would just assume it to be true? Maybe she would say, in the same distant and careful voice she had been using lately, they had grown apart. Maybe she would say they were better off without each other. And maybe she would think, secretly, that Petunia had been right about him all along. That he was a freak. What if she thought Potter had been right about him all along too?

He hid himself underneath his blankets. Ages passed before he heard his roommates' footsteps on the stairs. His heart pounded in his chest as he listened to the door being opened. He listened to them, scarcely daring to breathe, waiting for the words to fall. But no one mentioned him. They all eventually went to bed, and no one paid him any mind. After the initial moment of relief, he wondered why no one bothered to check on him, or ask him where he had been all day. He remembered, with no little embarrassment, that some of them must have seen him in the lake, that morning. But no one had caught wind of his little secret, yet.

Chapter 3

Truth be told, he had expected Snape not to return. It didn't matter much, yet. He was confident in this, as he tended to be, and positively certain that Snape would soon change his mind and come crawling back to him. In the meanwhile, however, he had neither cake nor company. Madam Pomfrey was ensuring he was bored out of his mind by keeping a sharp eye on who entered the Hospital Wing. If at least good old Snivellus were there, he would have something to amuse himself with.

Worse than the day was the night. He fell into a dreamless haze rather than sleep, and pangs of pain kept rushing up his arms in odd moments, rousing him. He sucked in his breath through his teeth, biting his lips and praying he wouldn't wake up Sally Solander, who was finally snoring instead of vomiting.

It was just his luck then, that the very next morning Severus Snape himself shuffled back into the Hospital Wing. He looked perfect too. His skin pallid and sweaty, and his face hidden behind his greasy hair. His thin frame was visibly shaking with shivers. Through the strands of hair, James could see his mouth was slightly parted, and he was heaving rather than just breathing.

Perfect.

Madam Pomfrey proved herself to be not as much of a nuisance as James had thought her to be, and guided Snape to the bed next to James. Snape, however, ignored her gentle guidance and went straight for the bed he had been in yesterday. She gave him a potion and tea, and left.

"Morning, Snape."

He was ignored, as Snape fill a spoon with bubbly, amber liquid. He managed to spill a drop on his trousers too. James smirked, and caught Snape's jaw clenching. Then he picked up his teacup and took a long sip, staring hard at Solander, who was retching again. The mood in the Hospital Wing was as lively as always.

"I said: morning, Snape."

Snape put down his teacup a little harder than necessary. His voice was hoarse when he spoke. "Good fucking morning to you too." Frankly, it was a great improvement to yesterday's nasal tones.

"I had hoped you would have brought the cake with you."

Much as he had expected, Snape glared at him, and then lied down and turned around. James wondered lightly how long he would be able to keep it up.

"You're terrible company."

No response.

"Good thing Sirius, Peter and Remus are about to cheer me up."

His shoulders tensed. James could imagine his expression perfectly – jaw clenched, mouth pressed

in a thin line, eyes furious. His smirk widened.

"I have just the kind of juicy news that would lift our moods. You know what I'm talking about, right Snape, those pretty pic-"

Snape shot up, looking just the way James had imagined him. "What do you want from me?"

"Cake, please!"

It should have been obvious, really, considering that he had been asking for it since yesterday, and he hadn't gotten a single slice. He had really thought asking for cake would have been a simple and easy request to start off with. If Snape was going to meet even the smallest of needs with such resistance, he was going to have to put some rules into place.

Severus stared at him for a long, silent moment, before leaning forward a little. His glare held little strength, considering the sweat shining on his forehead and his flustered cheeks. As if he thought he was something of a threat, shaking and clutching onto the bed post for support. "If you breathe as much as one word, Potter,"

"Yes, yes, just get me the damn cake already. I'm starving."

Snape looked stiffly at the door and Madam Pomfrey's Office, and then at Solander, who was stumbling towards it. "She won't let me out," he tried weakly.

James rolled his eyes, but he knew he was almost there. "She doesn't need to let you out if she doesn't see you going out."

"But she'll think I'm-"

"I'll tell her you went to fetch a book or whatever."

It couldn't have been timed better, because just then, the door opened to reveal three familiar figures. Snape was instantly on his feet, and rushed past them faster than James would have given him credit for. Peter tried to make him trip, but received a weak shove before Snape had disappeared.

"Ew." Sirius chuckled. "Snape touched you."

Peter held out his arm dramatically, and Sirius jumped away from it, nearly yelping, as though it were dangerous. "I'll have to ask Madam Pomfrey to disinfect my arm."

As the three of them gathered around James, Remus suddenly perked up. "You know what, that's not such a bad idea."

Sirius blinked and then nodded, patting Peter on the shoulder that was not attached to what they had deemed the infected arm. "Yeah, you don't want to catch whatever Snape's got."

James snorted. "Please, do it quickly. Before you know it, you'll start sweating excessively and your hair will be greasy enough to butter a sandwich with."

Peter raised his arm once again, muttering "Cursed limb of mine" dramatically, and Sirius pretended to shrink away in fear.

The noise of retching that was going on in the background covered up Sirius' fake weeping. "We have lost a friend today."

"I'm not lost," Peter sputtered. "Yet."

"Yet!" James, Sirius and Remus replied.

"Alright but this is not what I meant," Remus said, "I meant that we could fake illness to keep you company."

James wanted to cheer, but caught himself just in time. He realised that with them around, blackmailing Snape would be a lot harder. How would he even explain why Snape suddenly did all he asked for? He glanced at his friends and wished that he could share the secret with them, tell them about Snape's nasty possessions, so that they could pester him in unison. Then he imagined Sirius' soft and warm lips, and how they would shape around the names he would be calling Snape.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said, before he could think it through any better.

Sirius, however, agreed immediately with him. "Yeah, we can't all be here. Someone's got to take notes in class. I love you, Moony, but your handwriting is the most readable and you're least prone to sleeping during History of Magic."

"Yes, Remus, take one for the team," Peter encouraged him, ignoring the glare he and Sirius were receiving. Then he turned to Sirius. "We could pull off a Snivellus and have a dive in the lake."

"No." James shook his head, winning himself a moment to put together a proper explanation. "Pomfrey will kill you. She was telling Snape off for it too. Poor idiot, thought he could get away with it."

"I'm willing to break my leg for you." Sirius said, with more willingness and honesty than was called for. James felt oddly touched by his friend's devotion. It was getting hard to tell him off.

"They're going to cry if our team slinks down again, Padfoot. What happened to your Quidditch commitment?"

"It's no fun without you anyway." Sirius shrugged, and then grabbed Peter by his (non-infected) arm, raising it. "Well then, Wormtail, you are the Chosen One. Go break a leg."

Peter huffed. "Break your own leg. I'll eat a peanut, thank you very much."

"No." Remus immediately protested. It was always surprising to see how little Peter cared about his life-threatening peanut allergy. "Last time you did that you had to be taken to St Mungo's."

"And it was worth it," Peter explained as though it were obvious, but Remus shook his head. "I'll just chew it then? Anything to escape potions class. Sluggie always pairs me with that Frank Longbottom guy, and he can't even make tea by the looks of it."

"Listen, Wormtail, I appreciate the gesture, but I'm pretty good." He thought he saw a hint of hurt crossing Peter's expression, but it faded quickly. "Pomfrey said I should be out anytime soon and if one of you gets stuck here we're going to end up being here way more than we already are."

They agreed, reluctantly, and James almost breathed in relief when they left for class.

Snape must have been waiting outside until they left, because James could hear their jeering voices as they left and then caught the sound of Snape tiptoeing back inside. James wriggled himself into something more similar to a sitting position, flinching and grunting as he did so. Snape barely took any notice of it, blowing his nose rather loudly and still a little out of breath. James began to

suspect that if there was no poison in the cake, Snape might have breathed or coughed on it. It was rather unappetising.

“Strawberry cheesecake? I never would have guessed that you were a strawberry cheesecake kind of man.”

Snape, unfazed, looked up to him. “I hope you choke.”

“You’re such a funny guy, Snape, I had no idea.” He deadpanned.

With a little huff, Snape got to his feet again. He put the cake on top of his chest, where it was just out of reach. “Enjoy, asshole.”

Asshole, how uncreative. James briefly thought of Lily’s candid insults, and he wondered whether he could make Snape fetch her for him. There would be a lot more fun to be had, that was for sure. But for now, he had to make do with Snape, and the constant retching noises in the background. “You’ll have to feed me. You see, I can’t use my arms.”

“Will I have to scratch your ball sack next?”

James had to hold himself back from snorting. He bit down his smile, and managed to sound almost casual. “Actually, it’s been a little itchy.”

“Fuck you.”

“You really shouldn’t say that, Snape,” he said seriously. He shot an accusing glance at the boy, who blushed furiously, and looked as though he was going to scratch out his eyes. The scent of the cake, in the meanwhile had roused James’ hunger to the point where he couldn’t care less if it was going to make him sick. He was going to be around Snape either way, so he would just have to ask Madam Pomfrey for some pre-emptive health potion. “Now, make yourself useful and feed me.”

Snape moved, slowly and stiffly, until he stood next to him, making a show out how much he detested every living second spent in James’ presence. The latter, meanwhile, made himself a little more comfortable by kicking his feet under the blanket. He glanced up at Snape, who had stopped and wasn’t doing much more than glaring uncomfortably at him.

“Are you going to sit down or am I going to be staring up your nose holes for the next ten minutes?”

The mattress dipped and James shut his eyes tightly when his arm moved too. When he opened them again, Snape appeared a little smugger than he ought to be. It was high time to change that.

He opened his mouth a little, instantly wiping any smugness from Snape’s face. “Come on, Snivelus, it can’t be that bad, compared to the pictures-”

“Shut up about the bloody pictures.”

Said pictures, however, had already resurfaced in both their minds. Snape’s cheeks tinted red, and James felt a warm tingling in his abdomen. He watched Severus pick up the slice carefully, his long, bony fingers slowly bringing it closer to James’ mouth. The cake was good, but what was better was hearing how Severus held his breath with each slow, small bite he took. He savoured the taste, and he savoured the faint tremble in Severus’ hand when his lips brushed over his finger even more.

“You eat like a dog,” Severus commented weakly. He was looking anywhere but at James.

“Mmm,” James hummed, “It’s pretty good.”

The last bite was a small one, and James could feel the mattress moving as Snape shifted impatiently. He licked his lips slowly as Snape held it out for him, knowing he was being watched. He slowly opened his mouth, knowing he had seconds before Snape would snatch his hand away. He caught his fingertip with his lips, and licked the frosting off.

Snape yelped, nearly fell off the bed, and scurried back to his bed. “You’re sick.”

“I will be,” James said coolly, though he was warm in his face, “Get me some anti-flu potion.”

Chapter 4

The flu potion was working wonders on Severus. By this time, he could be going to classes, catching up on what he had missed, and finding a replacement for his transfiguration text book. Instead, he was trapped with Potter, who had kindly requested him to stop taking the potion and feign illness, lest he be allowed the freedom that Potter couldn't enjoy.

The only reason Madam Pomfrey believed him to be ill must be because Severus *always* looked sickly, even when he was feeling quite well. So there he was, spending long days in the hospital wing, with nothing but general fatigue and an occasional episode of queasiness. Boredom wasn't what he was truly worried about, though. The real problem lied one bed away from him, needing more entertainment than Severus could ever hope to provide.

"You know what I haven't had in a long time?"

Severus sighed deeply. He shifted so that he could properly glare at Potter. "If you say cake I'm going to go into a self-induced coma."

"Cake!"

There was something overly cheerful about his voice that drove Severus up the wall. Suffering was one thing, but suffering to Potter's joy was far worse. If he were honest with himself, however, it wasn't even that bad. That, of course, meant nothing more than "it could be worse". And that, then again, meant that it was only a matter of time before Potter would personally see to it that it would get worse.

He slipped past Madam Pomfrey, who was floo-calling with someone, and raised an eyebrow in silent judgement when she began laughing loudly.

Hogwarts had suddenly become the most interesting place to be, as long as it wasn't the Hospital Wing. There were several fairly interesting and safe routes to the kitchens, and he enjoyed a leisurely stroll through the empty corridors. He was missing out on an undoubtedly fascinating lesson of History of Magic, at the moment. Lily was probably taking notes for him, as she had promised a day ago.

It was a personal mission of his to find a cake that Potter wouldn't like, at with every passing day, the challenge became more impossible. It was very unfortunate that, unlike Pettigrew and Black, Potter didn't have any allergies. Snape mused for a moment, enjoying the tea and bread pudding the house elves had provided for him, and then asked for a lemon cake.

A part of him, almost instinctually, whispered into the back of his mind that the sharp taste of the poisonous Angel's Trumpet was neutralised by the acids of citric fruits. Another part of him told him that one dead bastard was not worth a lifetime sentence. With an extensive knowledge of potions and a long-running history of animosity, there was, unfortunately, no way around immediately becoming suspect number one.

Besides, he told himself as he shoved another mouthful of bread pudding into his mouth, it wasn't that bad. Not yet.

Distracted by hypothetical murder scenario's and bread pudding, he had forgotten that the lessons didn't go on forever. The trip back to the Hospital Wing was a tad more adventurous than usual, but he managed to pass by unseen. Just as he opened the door, he heard a familiar voice.

"Everyone is despairing without you."

Potter laughed. "I should be able to join the team again for practice by the end of the week."

"They've been so concerned about the upcoming match."

"What about you, Evans? Are you concerned?"

"About the upcoming match? I couldn't care less."

Severus jumped when a hand suddenly pushed him into the Hospital Wing. He barely managed to keep his balance, stumbling forward and turning around to face three smug looking faces.

"Look who we caught eavesdropping!" Black announced smugly and pushed him once more. Severus' hand had just curled around his wand when Madam Pomfrey came in.

"Quiet, some people are trying to- Severus, why aren't you in bed? I thought you were ill?"

Severus straightened himself and edged away from Black. "I'm- I went to the restroom."

The restroom, of course, was the other way.

"If you're healthy enough to make up excuses I might as well send you to class."

Please, Severus thought, please send me to class.

"Lie down. I'm going to give you another potion, and I don't want you leaving this room for the next two days or I'm going to charm your bed." She left with that, off to retrieve the potion and a cup of tea to drown it with.

Severus went straight to his bed, not even sparing Lily a glance as he passed her. Despite the protests of the others, she followed him. He wanted to wave her off, tell her to go cheer up her favourite Quidditch player, but he knew it wasn't fair. He sat down and pulled the blankets over his legs while she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I wanted to visit you." There was a hint of uncertainty in her voice that ticked him off.

"Why?" he snarled, barely keeping himself from adding an unnecessary comment involving Potter.

She gave him a sharp look, but didn't comment. "How are you feeling?"

He knew she was trying to be nice, but knowing didn't help. If she was there for Potter she needn't pretend otherwise. He shrugged. "Fine. Great. Can't you see?"

"You don't have to be such a dick about it, Severus." She kept her voice down as she spoke, but it was hard nonetheless. "What did I do wrong this time?"

"You're not doing anything wrong," he said defensively.

"Is it because I was talking with him?"

"No." Severus crossed his arms. The absolute silence in the room only made it worse; couldn't they at least pretend they weren't listening?

"Because I've asked you time and time again not to talk with those nasty-"

"I can't not talk with people whom I literally wake up with every morning," he hissed. "I share a room with them. They're in my house. Will you let it go?"

"Well then don't be such a baby about me talking with James!"

"I'm n-" He cut himself off to gape at her, and she blushed embarrassedly. "*James?*"

"I'm right here baby," Potter interrupted, flashing a bright smile from where he sat. "Scoot over a little and leave Grumpy be, Lily."

When Lily blushed again at being called by her first name, Severus abruptly turned his back to her and lied down, pulling the blankets up to his nose.

"He's just teasing, Severus." She mumbled, turning back to him and weakly trying to pull the sheets off of him. "You don't have to take everything so personally."

He shrugged, holding onto the blanket tightly and hiding half his face in the pillow. There were many things he wanted to say, and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep himself from blurting them out.

"Fine. Whatever. I tried."

She left with those words. He wanted to huff. Tried what? Getting cosy with Asshole Number 1? The sound of the door closing behind her cut through his thoughts. They had had many arguments, but this was the first one in which she had just left, and her absence weighed him down like a stone in his stomach.

Maybe she *had* tried. Maybe she had been trying for years, and he just kept shrugging her off. Like it shouldn't be him trying to be friends with someone like her. Because that's what it came down to, in the end. He needed her, even if he didn't want to need someone. She wanted – had wanted – him, even though she didn't need to. She could make friends anywhere, but sad little Snape should be glad he could even sit with a girl like her. That's what it came down to.

"Aw, Snivelly, are you having a bad day?" Peter chimed.

Madam Pomfrey came, belatedly, to the rescue, with a cup of tea and a potion in tow. The others minded their own business, reverting to subdued chattering, and that too grated on Severus' nerves. He was handed a spoon and a small, dark bottle.

"This will make you drowsy. You should really rest, or you'll be stuck here for longer."

He wanted to tell her that he wasn't ill. That this was just the way he looked. Sallow skin, greasy hair, and tired eyes. He said nothing, poured himself a spoonful of the amber liquid, and then emptied it into the teacup when she turned around to check up on Potter.

The annoying trio left for lunch, and whomever was left stuck in the Hospital Wing got a sandwich. Severus feigned sleep, and was left alone. After the noise that always came with Potter's friends – the obnoxious laughter, footsteps and echoes of footsteps, and low murmuring voices – the silence of the Hospital Wing felt sudden and strong. It was a different kind of silence, there. Severus was used to the silence of the library, which came with pages being turned and chairs scraping over the floor and quills scribbling away furiously. Or the quiet of his own house, which came in the wake of a fight, when the floorboards would moan softly underneath each step and everyone spoke to each other in stares and glares only. But this silence was unbearable. It was the sound of beds creaking and shifting, of Potter chewing, of distant chattering behind walls, and Solander asking Pomfrey for a glass of water in a dreary, hoarse voice.

“Wake up, Snivellus.”

Usually, he held out longer, but he was having a terrible day, and he had too little patience to endure any more. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Aw,” Potter chimed sadly, “Still sore about losing Lily?”

“I didn’t lose her,” he snapped, sitting up again. “Shut up.”

“Alright, whatever helps you sleep at night.” His voice was entirely too smug. Before Severus could think of something to say, Potter had already dropped the topic and moved on to his favourite pass-time. “I’m hungry.”

Snape stared at the empty plate on his nightstand. “You literally just wolfed down your sandwiches.”

“What’s three sandwiches to me? I want-”

“Don’t-”

“Cake!”

If he could spontaneously disintegrate, Merlin knows he would. He had had more than enough for one day. Just as he was about to say that Pomfrey would literally glue him to his bed if she caught him out once more, their conversation was interrupted. Miss Solander, who must have had an ironical sense of timing, began vomiting violently once again. They watched with a mixture of horror and disgust as she barfed all over herself, croaking a weak plea for help as Madam Pomfrey rushed to clean up. They should have been used to the smell of it, sour and pungent, by now, but they definitely weren’t. Potter couldn’t even cover his nose with his lifeless arms, to Severus’ satisfaction.

“Boys, I’m going to take Miss Solander to a separate room. I’ll be busy for a while.” She paused, looking at the two of them. “I am charming the room. If you try leaving it, Mr Snape, I’ll know, and you’ll regret it.”

The door finally closed behind them, and Severus glanced indifferently at Potter. “Bummer.”

“Give me your sandwiches.”

Severus turned his head to find that there were two sandwiches neatly laid on his night stand. He wrinkled his nose. What disturbed him most of all, was that it was becoming less and less daunting to sit next to Potter and feed him. Then again, being in close proximity of Potter wasn’t that much of a problem anymore, considering that he couldn’t do much more than talk, and if he was eating, even that was limited. It didn’t stop him from trying, though.

“Lily’s been real nice lately.”

Severus, already past the end of his patience, grabbed his collar and pressed Potter deeper into the mattress. “Will you shut up?”

Potter frowned, look down at the fist holding his collar, and back up at Severus. “If you’re that angry about Lily finally ditching your worthless arse, maybe you should get yourself together and not continue acting like the pathetic baby you are.”

Severus stared at him, gobsmacked, and then blinked. “You think you can get away with

everything, don't you?"

"Actually, I think I should put you back in your place. I think you might want to let go of me for a start."

Severus let go, but not without giving him a foul look. It was all he had left.

Potter snickered. "You're so pathetic, you know that? Just look at you, blowing off Lily. You're making this so easy for me."

"What do you want?"

"And you're a poofster too," Potter continued, his voice lowering. "That's just so pathetic. Do you have a little boy crush, Severus? I bet you like it when I lick your fingers-"

"Shut up!" He snapped, pulling his hands back.

Potter just shook his head slowly and smirked. "Yeah, you do. I bet you've thought about some nasty things. I bet you've thought about me."

Despite feeling his cheeks warming, he glared. "Don't flatter yourself."

Potter leant forward just a little. "You're disgusting." His voice grew lower and deeper still, and something in his eyes glinted dangerously. "I bet you've done some filthy things. Have you? Or are you still a sad little virgin?"

Severus' swallowed, his mouth suddenly very dry. He almost flinched when his voice came out thin and defensive. "None of your business."

"Do you get off on your roommates? Ever given Mulciber a handjob?"

"I told you to shut up!" The room grew smaller with each word they said, and Severus felt cramped up and unable to move. His face was burning.

"Did you blow Malfoy, that night? Do you bend down for Slughorn to get your grades up?"

"You're sick," Severus hissed. "You-"

"Why don't you get me off then?"

Severus parted his lips, then paused. "What?"

"Come on then, make yourself useful. You like touching boys anyway, don't you?"

"I'm not going to-"

"I wonder what Lily will think of you if I tell her. She will believe me. She won't be able to look you in the eye anymore."

The room grew silent – truly silent. There was no distant chatter, no nursing, no sheet rustling. Severus breathed hard.

"Unzip my trousers, Snape."

His hand trembled faintly as he reached for Potter's fly. Through the fabric, he could feel Potter's cock twitching at the touch, and nearly pulled his hands away. He moved slowly, waiting for a

harsh, loud laugh and something along the lines of “*You really think I’d let you touch me?*”. But Potter said nothing; he only swallowed hard when Severus carefully stroked his length through the thin cloth of his underwear. He shifted impatiently. “Are you waiting for Pomfrey to walk in?”

Severus tensed, and slipped his hand underneath the waistband of Potter’s pants. It felt hot and soft and Severus wanted, for a split second, to push down his underwear to see it. With a few slow strokes, Potter’s cock was half hard. The sound of it – skin rubbing skin, Potter’s hitching breath, his own swallowing – was painfully loud in the room. He caught a drop of precum, and smeared it over the head of his cock with his thumb, hearing Potter exhale hard.

“Faster.”

It was not entirely unlike getting himself off. He picked up the pace little by little, shivering when Potter barely stifled a moan. Then he paused, ignoring Potter’s disapproving grunt. He pushed down his underwear, certain he would burn his knuckles through it if he didn’t. Potter’s cock felt hard and heavy in his pale hands. The head of it was red and wet with precum. Severus tried thinking only of getting it over with, refusing to acknowledge the heat pooling in his own abdomen, and wrapped his fingers around the base. He worked it up and down, picking up the pace until Potter was panting again.

“Ah,” Potter shuddered, spilling cum over his own stomach. “Oh, fuck.”

Severus stared at Potter’s face, wrinkled up and eyes shut tight, before it relaxed again. He wiped his hand on the sheets, eyes darting towards Potter’s softening cock without his permission. Swiftly, he stood up, and moved stiffly to his own bed, no sound other than panting coming from Potter. The cool touch of his sheets made him realise how hot he felt, and he shivered.

Chapter 5

“Unzip my trousers, Snape.”

He watched Snape’s hand move hesitantly, and wondered whether he had ever done something with another guy. The thought that he was the first one Snape ever touched that way sent a wave of heat through him. Snape’s fingertips brushed slowly over his length, and then they froze. Just when he thought Snape was going to pull back, the latter continued, painfully slowly. He chose to believe it was inexperience that made his touch slow and a little awkward, rather than reverence.

After several days of forced abstinence, he felt like grinding up against the palm of Snape’s hand. The need for release was growing sharper and tighter in his abdomen quickly. It was better to make this quick, he thought, keeping himself from shuddering when Snape finally palmed him more firmly.

“Are you waiting for Pomfrey to walk in?”

James closed his eyes for a moment, imagining Snape’s long, bony fingers around his erection. When he glanced down, and only saw the rough movements through the fabric of his underwear. He wanted to tell Snape to push down his underwear, to use both his hands, to take it into his mouth, but the mere thoughts made his hips twitch. Afraid he would come too fast, he glanced at Snape’s face. He had, for the first time, tucked his hair behind his ear. He was entirely unaware of James’ staring, his black eyes fixed on James’ dick, his lips slightly parted and a deep red blush on his cheeks. His tongue ran over his lips absentmindedly. James imagined those pink lips around his cock, and his soft tongue running over the head of his dick the same way Snape’s thumb was doing. He closed his eyes again, breathing hard.

“Faster.”

He inhaled sharply as the heat and tightness in his abdomen overwhelmed him. Just when he was about to come, the hand around his cock disappeared, and the slightly cold, damp fabric of his pants snapped back in place. He was startled back to his senses, and was about to say something when his underwear was, quite roughly, pulled down. For a moment, his erection felt nothing but the cool air, until Snape’s hand returned and picked up the pace again. The sight of his pale fingers wrapped around his dick brought him right back to where they had left off. He stifled a groan, trying to keep his eyes open just a little longer and soak in the sight of Snape’s moist lips and dark stare, and his pale hand working his cock. He came hard, trembling in Snape’s loosening grip until he saw stars.

After a good wank, or a little fun with a girl, James always slept like a baby. Snape’s handjob had been neither phenomenal, nor bad. Sure, he’d had better orgasms. But he had never been so aroused. He had never imagined that it would be so fundamentally different with another boy.

That was why, several hours later, James could not fathom why he was still awake. He had been staring at the ceiling all this time, listening to the slow breathing of Snape next to him. It was all he could hear. That, and every time Snape would toss and turn, which he did a lot.

Had that really been Snape’s first time? Then again, so what if it was? Snivellus should thank him. Merlin knows no one else would have granted it to him. But what if there was someone else? He

hadn't even considered that, had he? But Snape wouldn't have anyone. Who would want someone like Snape. Maybe someone just as dirty and sneaky as Snape himself? James turned his head to look at Snape, whose pale face looked waxen under the dimmed candlelight, framed in a halo of black hair.

Had he really blackmailed someone into jerking him off? What kind of person did that make him? Well, it wasn't like anyone knew. Except for Snape knew, and Snape was someone. Would Sirius have done such a thing? Not with Snape, of course. Or with any boy. Still, nothing bad had happened in the end, right? So, in the end, what did it matter?

As the next day passed, James found himself unable to look at Snape the same way. Actually, he found himself unable to look at Snape at all. Every time he would catch a glimpse he would see things that weren't there – or rather, things that were supposed to be there. Snape was no longer just a mop of greasy hair, a gigantic nose and crooked teeth. He was a pale face, and downcast eyes, and tight-lipped answers to Madam Pomfrey. What was worse, was that Snape had stopped bickering and complaining at every turn. Instead, he'd grown entirely quiet. He never faced him, and shrugged at anything he said.

Torn between panic and annoyance, James was becoming increasingly desperate to return to the state they had left off in. Ignoring the alarm bells he could faintly hear in the back of his head, he ventured into the topic that hung most strained between them.

"So, Snape," he said, rousing the latter from a doze. His voice was as teasing and smooth as ever. There was a hint of genuine curiosity that he couldn't deny, but he did know how to hide it behind a sneer. "Did you ever actually do anything, well, *you know*?"

Snape rubbed his eyes tiredly. They were lacklustre, and had dark shadows underneath them. James wished, suddenly, that he would look at him. "Do what?"

"Do something with a man."

Snape smirked half-heartedly. "I punched Black once."

James felt his smirk slipping off his face. Had their little *thing* been Snape's only experience? He felt ridiculous for feeling anything that wasn't amusement. He stared at Snape, who stared at the ceiling. It didn't seem quite that funny anymore.

"I didn't know you were that pathetic," he commented, although his voice lacked the usual smugness. He was trying.

Snape didn't notice anything unusual. "How are you any better?" He scoffed. The second part was said softer, but in the same tone, like he tried not to be embarrassed about it. "You came in my hand."

James snorted. He had been thinking about this all night. Now his brain felt clogged. "Merlin, you don't think I came because of you, do you? I just need a pair of hands to do what I can't do with my own." His heart was pounding. Why was it pounding?

Snape clenched his jaw. "You're disgusting," he said. "I might be the only one who knows it, but you are really, really disgusting."

It wasn't meant to be an insult, and that made it worse. It was just a statement. And James felt every bit of it crawling under his skin. He huffed. "What, I'm disgusting for receiving a hand job? I daresay that makes you worse for giving one."

"Fine." Snape sounded tired. Why was he tired? He did nothing but sleep and stare at the ceiling and maybe fetch him cake.

James sighed deeply, struggling to get into a more comfortable position. Finally, he gave up, and turned his head back to Snape, who had closed his eyes. He looked like a corpse. "I think you've gotten yourself sick, Snively."

There was a long pause, and he feared for a moment that Snape had fallen asleep. But then his mouth moved – only his mouth. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

Silence. Isn't it what he wanted? He thought long and hard, far longer and far harder than he knew he should. He spoke, suddenly and loudly, startling Snape out of his dozing once again. "What I'm saying is that I think you're genuinely sick. You're not up to your usual level of swearing and hating me."

Snape smirked, but half asleep still, it almost looked like a smile. "If swearing and being hated is what you want, you could have told me from the start."

"You need to take some of that potion Pomfrey gives you." He paused for a moment. That was not how they spoke to each other. That was how he would speak to Peter when he'd caught a cold again. He readjusted his tone to something more whiny. "You're no fun like this."

Snape snorted. "I'm not ill."

Admittedly, he had never made for a healthy-looking boy. Lack of hygiene had been most of that, topped off with a fixed scowl and twitchy movements. This was different. This was- this was no fun. "You look like a corpse. Not like your usual deathly self, I mean like an actual corpse. You don't move, you smell, and you barely talk."

"Thank you for your concern."

"Shut up Snape. Go take the potion." His patience was worn thin. It drove him mad to stare at the boy, and there was literally nothing else he could do all day long. The longer he stared at Snape, the more he felt like something had shifted between them. Something that was his fault. Something that needed to change back. He groaned but Snape ignored it. He was tired of being trapped in the bed, and now he didn't even have someone to fight with. That was all he wanted. Someone to yell at.

"I said, go take the damn potion."

Snape's eyelids fluttered, but then they closed again. "I'm good here, actually," he said, and sunk away deeper into his mattress. "So, no, and fuck you."

With those words, he fell asleep. A part of James – a very childish, selfish part – wished that Snape would just die. It would solve the problem, to some extent. No more Snape meant no more problem. Another part of him rushed to add that he didn't *really* want him to die. Because that would mean that he would need to find someone else to fight with. Lily, unfortunately, was becoming nicer by the day, and it was suffocating to no end. He couldn't help drawing her in, though. Every time Snape caught a glimpse of them, every time he eavesdropped on them, a flame of jealousy consumed him, and James thrived in the glow of it.

It was silent. Distantly, he could hear a bell chime, and in the other room, the ticking of the clock. Once again, he found himself chained to the bed, and utterly bored. Snape turned in his sleep, and unknowingly faced James. His black hair pooled around his pale face, and James wished at least

that Madam Pomfrey would think about washing the filthy mess. Before, he would have reprimanded himself for staring at Snape when he slept. Now, he had surrendered to it, as it was the most interesting- scrap that, the least boring thing to do.

His face was different, when he slept. Without the scowl and the glaring, black eyes, it was almost soft. His lips were chapped and pale – wouldn't make for a good kiss. He was gaunt, even for a boy of only sixteen, but not as bad as it had always seemed. His hands, one of which was half-tucked underneath the pillow, were small for a boy's hands. James felt suddenly nauseous.

The silence was interrupted by a pair of footsteps that announced Madam Pomfrey's arrival. "You've been doing well," she said. "In a few days, you can go back to your regular activities."

"A few days? But it doesn't hurt anymore," he protested. More than ever, he wanted to escape the room. He was becoming claustrophobic within the tall and wide walls of the Hospital Wing. The room was infinitely smaller with Snape at his side.

"I know, but I also know that telling you to rest outside of the Hospital Wing is wasted on you, so I'm keeping you a little longer just to make sure you're ready. You had a nasty incident, Mr Potter." He tried to protest, but she gave him a stern look, leaving no place for discussion. She covered his arms again with the healing bandages, which left them numb and weak, and mentioned lunch. He was not hungry, but he said nothing.

When rising, she cast a worried glance towards Snape, who was still facing them, sighing deeply in his sleep. "Your companion has not been doing as well as you. I'm afraid that if this goes on I'm going to have to call in a mediwizard." Then she turned to him, her voice barely a whisper, despite that she had been speaking normally just moments ago. "He is a very untalkative boy, but maybe he told you how he was feeling?"

He knew what he should say, but he also knew that he was not going to say it. Instead, he spoke, before he could come to his senses and change his mind. "I think," he said, struggling to say any more, "that maybe he hasn't been taking his potions."

"Is that so?" Madam Pomfrey suddenly look irked, but she didn't say any more. She left, muttering something indistinguishable under her breath. He had always been fond of her, but now he felt that he could do without her.

He shifted in his bed, persistently uncomfortable. The quietness left too much space for thoughts, and he felt smothered in them. Why was everything suddenly so difficult? Why couldn't he just order Snape around like before? Why couldn't he stop looking at Snape, expecting to see his intense gaze and soft lips? He groaned softly. He was not good at thinking; he had never been. He was a physical man. Right now, he needed a few hours on his broom, until he was sweaty and heaving, to clear his mind. His brain was churning out more and more nonsense with every passing hour.

It was evening by the time the door to the Hospital Wing opened. He had hoped to see Sirius, and the others, but instead it was just Lily. Snape was sound asleep, so unless he could get under her skin, this was to be another painfully dull evening.

"Evans," he greeted her.

"Potter," she said, in the same tone, but with less enthusiasm. She stopped, and glanced past him, at Snape's bed. "You don't know whether he will wake up soon?"

"He's been doing nothing but sleep all day, right Snivelly?" he said loudly, hoping to rouse Snape

with just that. It had little effect.

Lily, to his disappointment, ignored him. She walked to Snape's side, worrying her lower lip. He knew instantly that she felt guilty, and rolled his eyes. She seemed, however, reluctant to shake him awake. Or perhaps just generally reluctant to touch him – he did smell of old sweat, and his skin was oilier than ever.

"Has Madam Pomfrey said anything?"

"He's going to die."

"James!" She turned quickly on her heel to give him a dirty look.

James grinned. He had missed that expression. "Yes, Lily, my love."

She huffed, but said nothing. Instead, she started taking out what looked like notes, and laid them on Snape's nightstand. Then she put a blank note on top, and whipped out her quill to scribble something on top of it. Finally, she put her stuff away and turned back to James. "Don't touch this."

"And what if I do?"

It was beautiful. The look of sheer annoyance on Lily's face reminded him why he spent so many years bothering her and Snape. If they had not been in the Hospital Wing, she might even have hexed him again. "I don't understand boys," she said, trying to keep her voice low. "Why do you have to be so childish about everything?"

"I'm not childish!" he yelled after her, but she left without answering. He slumped. It didn't seem like anyone else was going to come down there.

"You are the most childish person I've ever met."

He turned around to Snape and grinned broadly. "Good morning, sleeping beauty."

Snape growled something under his breath and stretched lazily. Then he glanced at the notes Lily left him. James gasped. "Wait, you were awake while Lily was here!"

"Well observed," he answered dryly.

"Why didn't you want to talk to her?"

Snape paused for a moment, as if considering whether to answer or not. He settled for a shrug, which was still better than the "None of your business" James had been expecting. It was good enough, he decided, and then he spoke again. "Just tell her you're sorry."

"I'm not sorry."

"Doesn't matter. Girls like hearing it," he smiled knowingly, while Snape pretended to be absorbed in the notes. "And tell her she was right, that hits their sweet spot."

Slowly, Snape put down his notes in his lap. "Since when do you care?"

"I don't," he replied immediately. Caring was far too big of a word. He simply knew how to handle girls, and he was so desperate for some conversation that he would give Snape a few wise words of advice if he had to.

Snape, instead of being grateful for James' input, only arched his eyebrows. Then he returned to

his notes, much to James' displeasure. It didn't take long before the silence was driving James up the wall again.

"So, are you still feeling like sleeping twenty hours a day?"

Nothing.

"Anything interesting written in those notes? Is that History of Magic? Ugh, never mind. I wouldn't want to read that if you would pay me to."

Nothing.

"Hey, I think I should inform you that Pomfrey is angry with you. It's kind of obvious that you haven't been getting better. She's suspecting you haven't been taking your potions. It didn't make her very happy."

Nothing.

"Sirius told me about this cool jinx a few days ago. It's non-verbal, so people won't know who did it. Makes you dangle upside down in the air. I've been meaning to try it out, but I haven't had anyone to test it with. Yet."

Nothing.

"*Qui tacet consentit*, if I don't hear a no you're about to be jinxed!"

Snape then put down his notes, and turned to James. For the first time since what felt like ages, they looked eye to eye. His chest tightened, as if his heart had skipped a beat. And then Snape smirked.

"Are you gay, Potter?"

Chapter 6

Severus was convinced that being blackmailed into getting Potter off would leave him permanently damaged. If it wasn't the trauma of the act itself, it would be the mere fact that it was Potter.

It was frightening when that wasn't the case. There was a sense of obligatory shame and hatred that he clung onto. It made him feel seven years old again, when he had once dared to play with his mother's china set, and one of the teacups had slipped through his fingers and shattered at his feet. Everything had been as it should have been – the heavy footsteps of his father, the shaking of his knees and the moment of silence before the storm. And then all he got was “oh, that was an ugly cup anyway” and “good riddance” and “just pick up the big shards, I'll do the rest”.

He should feel glad that it wasn't worse, but it felt wrong for not being that way. As if the anticipated slap to the face still hung in the air, and he couldn't tell if it was coming to him or not. Now too, the expected humiliation and anger felt like they were right behind him, but every time he turned around, there was nothing.

Severus had never imagined his first anything to be romantic. He hadn't really imagined much of it at all. When he thought about sex, it was never the first time. The men were handsome strangers, and the scenario always started with a seemingly casual conversation about potions, dark arts or ancient runes. They would be intelligent, but he would be clever, and both of them would have the same kind of dark humour that would soften the mood. There would be sensuous stares and little touches that he would pretend not to notice. Then little touches would become lingering hands, rubbing slow circles, until someone would be on their knees and the other would be moaning. They never undressed, safe for pulling down their pants just enough, and their relationship, within the realms of his fantasy, never extended beyond one encounter.

Not that he had expected reality to be remotely close to his imagination. God no, he always knew he should consider himself lucky if he could lose his virginity before leaving Hogwarts. That on its own turned out to be a challenge, considering that he was incredibly picky, but not nearly handsome enough to afford it. Up until the incident with Potter, his entire experience in the fields of love, romance and sex were tits and dicks printed out on paper, and being snogged once on a dare.

It was, in a way, oddly reassuring to have had some kind of sexual contact. Everyone always made it out to be such a big deal, and the longer he remained a virgin, the more alienated he felt from the whole idea. But, at last, there was nothing grand about it. It was just getting someone off, or having someone get you off, or both.

Still, he couldn't look at Potter. Not without immediately remembering. The images were too vivid in his mind still. Potter's flustered face, the sound of his deep, barely withheld moans, the heavy feeling of his cock in Severus' hand. All of it flooded his mind with every glance towards Potter.

It didn't take long for him to notice that things weren't going about their usual way for Potter either.

For one, Potter didn't ask him to get cake anymore. He didn't ask him to do anything anymore. True, Snape spent most his time in a sleepy haze, and hours would pass without his noticing, but that only made it more suspicious. Why wouldn't Potter wake him up? If Potter knew he held that much power over Severus, why didn't he abuse it further? Was that a little “too Slytherin”? And if it was, did that mean his twisted sense of justice was keeping him nice and quiet now? If it was the latter, Severus certainly didn't mind. Finally, things were going better for *him*.

He lied quietly, and peeked through the strands of his hair. It was not the first time he caught Potter staring at him. There was something weird about his face. It wasn't smug, or annoyed, or even indifferent. He sat stiffly in his own bed, swaying his leg over the edge impatiently, and fidgeting with his blanket. His breakfast laid untouched on his night stand.

That was when it dawned on Severus: Potter felt *guilty*.

Oh, what a glorious realisation. If it was true, then that restored any imbalance in the power between them. Moreover, if Severus played it well, he could even tip the scales into his own favour. Merlin knew *he* wouldn't be afraid to wipe the floor with Potter.

He was just about to say something when Lily entered the Hospital Wing. He shut his eyes. It was just his luck then, that Lily had, for once, come for him. He knew she came to even things out between them. They would say nothing about what had happened, and it would be another unspoken apology strung between them. He couldn't blame her – he had done the same countless times, but he was too tired to feign interest in her notes and pretend everything was fine. They would make up another time.

Except what if they didn't? Because that was going to happen some day, wasn't it? They were already further apart than they had ever been. Was there anything he could do to prevent it? He could neither drop his passion for the Dark Arts nor turn himself straight, and were those not exactly the things that would repel her?

His thoughts made him uncomfortable, and once he was sure Lily had left, his eyes fluttered open and he shifted. After all the restless sleep, he suddenly felt painfully awake.

"Good morning, sleeping beauty."

Snape nearly snorted. There was something to be said for Potter. What that was, he wasn't sure himself.

Feeling more awake than he had for the past few days, he decided it was high time to see how much of that guilt he could dig up. He ignored Potter entirely, and instead glanced at the notes Lily had left him. Seeing her handwriting made his stomach twist, and he looked away.

Luckily, Potter's stupidity was enough of a distraction to keep him from fretting. "Wait, you were awake while Lily was here!"

He fought hard not to roll his eyes and to keep his voice indifferent. "Well observed."

"Why didn't you want to talk to her?"

And since when do you care? he wanted to snap back, but held still. Potter's number one priority had always been to ruin their friendship. He wondered what happened to that, now that Potter had gotten himself cold feet. A bit of prodding should do, so he settled for a shrug.

"Just tell her you're sorry."

Severus nearly smirked. Potter was *easy*. He picked up the notes and feigned disinterest in Potter's input. "I'm not sorry."

"Doesn't matter. Girls like hearing it. And tell her she was right, that hits their sweet spot."

If only he cared one bit about what girls liked to hear. It wasn't even bad advice; he knew it to be true. It was just that he didn't care to be sweet with Lily – that was the whole point of their

friendship. He was sweet with people he wanted a favour from. What he *did* care about was how eager Potter was to help him. There was no subtlety in Potter's sudden helpfulness, so Severus figured his own subtlety could be put aside as well.

"Since when do you care?"

"I don't." Potter replied, too quickly.

Oh, you guilty thing, Severus thought. It was such typical Gryffindor behaviour. Once they sensed they had wronged someone, they couldn't fight the urge to somehow make it right. He would be lying if he hadn't sometimes enjoyed seeing Lily struggle with it. It was getting hard to maintain a straight face, so he returned to his notes. Potter began to fidget immediately.

"So, are you still feeling like sleeping twenty hours a day?"

Aw, are you bored, Potter? You have the entirety of my poor little reputation in your hand, though, so you could have woken me up any time you liked. But you didn't.

"Anything interesting written in those notes? Is that History of Magic? Ugh, never mind. I wouldn't want to read that if you would pay me to."

Is this History of Magic? It looks a little like a long letter Lilly wrote, the way she used to do every summer. She has a lovely handwriting – perhaps they should start speaking only through letters. Her words are far more bearable than her stares.

"Hey, I think I should inform you that Pomfrey is angry with you. It's kind of obvious that you haven't been getting better. She's suspecting you haven't been taking your potions. It didn't make her very happy."

Ah. So you told her I didn't take them, but you forgot to add that you were the one making me do it. Asshole. Why care, though? Do you really think everything will be alright once I start feeling a little better? First my friendship with Lily, now my health, you must be really guilty. Does it feel that bad to bully me? But it's not about me, is it? You've never had any problem with hurting me. It's about what we did. What you made me do. You're guilty because-

"Sirius told me about this cool jinx a few days ago. It's non-verbal, so people won't know who did it. Makes you dangle upside down in the air. I've been meaning to try it out, but I haven't had anyone to test it with. Yet."

You're guilty because you liked it.

"Qui tacet consentit, if I don't hear a no you're about to be jinxed!"

Severus then put down his notes, and turned to James. For the first time since what felt like ages, they looked eye to eye. Potter looked at him, like a deer caught in headlights. Finally, Severus allowed himself to smirk.

"Are you gay, Potter?"

Silence. A blank stare. "What?"

"You heard me."

Potter blinked a few times, as if he wasn't sure what he had just heard. He blanched, very briefly, before a blush spread over his cheeks and all the way to his ears. Then he abruptly began shaking

his head. "What? No. I'm not- I'm not gay."

Severus would have laughed, richly and thoroughly, if he had not been baffled. The element of surprise apparently had a magic of its very own. He stared at Potter as if he saw him for the first time. "You *are*."

"I'm not!"

Potter was gay. *Potter was gay*. The damnable hypocrite had ordered around Severus without hesitation for the very same secret he himself had been hiding. All his threats and all his promises were equally dangerous for the bastard himself. Severus couldn't believe it. What an idiot. What an absolute asshole. He wanted nothing more but to spit in his face. Or better yet- to give him a taste of his own venom.

Instead, he just laughed. It was absurd. Potter, still wide-eyed and red in his face, was gay.

Potter's mouth worked as though he was chewing on a slice of lime. The blush had spread to his neck, and he was flexing his hands restlessly. "Shut up."

It was not an order, not anymore. It was supposed to be, but the balance had already shifted. They were once again back to where they had been before – not entirely, perhaps, but close enough. Whatever Potter would throw at him now was no longer an order, it was a challenge, like it used to be, and it was one that Severus was certain he could take on.

"You're going to tell *me* to shut up? I hope you don't think you still have that kind of leverage over me, Potter." He almost purred his name, far too pleased to back down. He slipped from underneath the blanket, getting to his feet in what felt like the first time for days.

"Well, you've recovered quickly," Potter huffed, but he squared up anyway, as though Severus was about to deck him.

Severus slowed down for a moment, his blood pressure dropping and his vision swimming. He was used to it, and it passed in a moment, but his legs were still stiff and wobbly. Despite his glee, the general tiredness that had been plaguing him for days had not truly subsided, but he was damned if he was going to let that stop him. He smirked, and calmly approached Potter's bedside. "I think the tables have turned on you, Potter."

"I think the tables are equal for us now."

Severus' smile fell. "That's not how language works."

Potter barked a laugh. He even threw his head back, baring his throat and the stubble that had begun to grow. There was a hint of nervousness in his voice, which sounded breathier than usual. "You're such a nerd, Snape."

A nerd. Lily called him a nerd. Potter called him- well, more offensive things. Before he could worry about a reply, Potter leant forward with a smirk of his own. A challenge gleamed in his eyes, and one they knew they couldn't back down from – not now that everything had shifted once again. They were mere inches apart, and suddenly he felt the gentlest touch of a hand holding his chin. He blinked in surprise, and Potter's eyelids fluttered, and all he could think was *no, wait, this is not how it's supposed to go*, but he still let himself be drawn closer. He felt hot breath tickling his lips and a lightness in his head that had nothing to do with blood pressure. Although he held perfectly still, he had the distinct sensation of falling.

A kiss. Oh God. Oh no. This was happening. He was not ready. What was going on?

It was over before he had realised it. Short. Warm. Wet. He licked his lips, and the foreign taste made him shiver. Potter's eyes were pinned on him, making it very hard to think beyond his mouth.

"Severus? James?"

Chapter 7

“Severus? James?”

If there was one single moment during which James could have cursed Lily, it was that moment exactly. Snape jerked away from him, as though a bucket of cold water had hit him. He gaped at Lily, who gaped back at them.

It was high time to break the tense silence, and James took that task upon himself.

“Snape’s gay!”

Snape whipped his head back so fast it must’ve hurt. The hatred in his expression would have been threatening, had James not seen it so many times before. Finally, Snape lashed back. “*You’re gay!*”

He shook his head like a petulant little child. “Nuh-uh!”

“You just kissed me!” Snape sputtered, gesturing vividly at him.

There was nothing like completely throwing him off. He just took everything so seriously, and worked himself into such a mess so easily. James grinned. “I think you mean to say that *you* just kissed *me*!”

He had not anticipated for Snape to get physical, so he was surprised when Snape grabbed him by his collar. Potter let him; there was something about his touch that made him giddy, even if Snape had every intention of strangling him. It was almost sweet to see how hard he tried to be threatening. In response, James gently cupped his face, unable to keep the grin from his face when Snape froze – he could almost see how his mind went blank.

“James Potter,” Lily startled them out of their, well, their whatever it was. “What have you gone and done now?”

“I have gone and done nothing,” he defended himself smoothly. “Snivelly, however, has realised what you have been unable to see all this time: that I am irresistible.”

“You self-absorbed bastard,” Snape huffed, “You think you’re – let go of my face already, Potter – You think you’re some kind of-”

“The answer to that is yes,” James cut him off.

“Severus,” Lily said gently, “Could I talk with you for a moment?”

Snape, who had just gained some redness in his cheeks, immediately lost all colour again. “I’m not allowed to leave the Hospital Wing,” he mumbled feebly.

“You like boys?”

Snape clenched his jaw, looking anywhere but at her. There was an odd expression on his face, like he wanted to yell, but sadder, and James suddenly realised that Snape looked like he was about to cry.

A silence ensued, in which neither knew what to say, and James for once knew it was better for him to keep his trap shut. He did, however, notice that Lily’s face had turned into an interesting shade of pink. Snape, in the meanwhile, was so focused on not looking at her that he was

completely oblivious to what was written all over her face.

James snorted. "She was in love with you, you muppet."

Both their heads snapped towards him. Lily's face reddened to the very roots of her hair. Snape just gave him a bewildered look, like he had already forgotten James was there. When he finally looked at Lily, his eyes widened in disbelief, and then James could practically hear the click his brain made as everything fell into place.

"Oh."

"It's- it was last year. It was just a bit of a crush," she rushed to explain. "I thought you weren't interested, or maybe you were just particularly dense when it came to girls, but I didn't think you were gay."

Snape huffed. "I'm not dense."

"Yeah you are," both Lily and James replied.

Snape gave them an offended look, but said nothing of it anymore. Instead, he crossed his arms and tried to sound casual. "I thought you liked him," he said, with a nod towards James.

"I like him as a friend, maybe, sort of," she admitted, "But I don't *like like* him, Sev. I wouldn't *like like* a dude like him."

"Did you just say *like like*?" James interrupted her, and then he turned some to face her more, "Wait, what's wrong with a dude like me? Why wouldn't you *like like* a dude like me?"

Lily arched her eyebrow at him, but he could tell she was suppressing a grin. "You're still kind of a douchebag, James."

"Excuse you, I am a loveable, handsome, funny and sexy douchebag." He explained, counting each of his great traits on his fingers.

Snape laughed and shook his head, then mimicked him as he said, "What you're really saying is that you're an over-confident, vain, brainless douchebag."

"You didn't correct sexy," James smirked, and then threw in a wink as well. "You just admitted you think I'm sexy."

Instantly, Snape was glaring again. Merlin, it thrilled James to see him so eager to pick up a fight. There was so much rage in that lanky body of his. When Snape spoke, it was with the same sharp tone as ever, but the blush on his face really undid it. "The only thing I *think* is how I will scratch your eyes out."

He ignored the remark completely, and turned back to Lily instead. "You heard him, right, doe-eyes? He said I'm sexy."

She deadpanned at him, shaking her head slowly. "I think you two are incredible."

"Doe-eyes?" Snape narrowed his eyes, first at James, then at Lily.

"Yeah, Doe-eyes. That's the nickname I came up with for Lily," James explained. "Every cool person has a nickname."

When Snape huffed in response, James smirked. Was he jealous? Did he want a nickname too?

James' brain was already running through every word he could remember to think of a nickname. Too bad some parts of his brain were short-circuiting.

Snape, of course, remained as offended as ever. "Like Snivellus?"

Ah, yes, those were technically nicknames too. "No, that's just me being a douchebag."

Snape rolled his eyes, turning back to Lily, who had been observing them quietly and looked almost amused. Snape began to fiddle with his sleeve, which James had rarely ever seen him do. There was a moment of silence before he looked up to Lily, and asked, very softly, "You had a crush on me?"

James felt chest tightening as he heard the words. There was something very vulnerable in his expression, something he had never seen there before. James felt like he had to do something, although he had no clue what.

Lily smiled. "Yeah."

Yeah? He could think of hundreds of things that could have answered that better than "yeah". A part of him knew that he was not supposed to be joining that conversation, but he had never cared much for that part. "I think she missed a month worth of Potion's classes staring at you," he said casually. "I, for one, was convinced the two of you went snogging after dinner."

Snape blushed, fighting off a small smile that left James a little breathless. Lily, on the other hand, closed her eyes, and looked as if she were praying for patience. "James, can you not."

He shrugged, and tore his eyes off of Snape's lips. "I'm just saying what everyone else was thinking."

She gave him a peculiar look then. "Well, you might be interested in what others are thinking about you." Just as James wanted to reply, she cut him off, "Don't say they're thinking that you're hot, or I will beat you."

With a laugh, he raised both his hands in the air in surrender. "Fine, fine, then tell me what else they're thinking about me."

Lily bit her lip, not looking at him as she worked out how to phrase it. It didn't bide well if even Lily Evans had trouble telling him. "A few people," she began, slowly, and then quickly added, "but mostly Sirius," before pausing again, "They think you're gay."

"And I was right!" Sirius yelled as he kicked open the door of the Hospital Wing. Peter caught it just in time so that it didn't actually slam against the wall, and shushed them, muttering something about Pomfrey.

James blinked. How long had they been eavesdropping behind that door? His heart was racing in his chest, and his voice faltered a little when he spoke. "Wait, you knew?"

"You're like my brother, Prongs, of course I knew!" He said, throwing his arms up in a dramatic gesture. Just like he would do with any other news. James took a deep breath as Sirius continued. "We were just waiting until you were ready to tell us!"

Peter gently closed the door, looking at Lily and then at Snape. Remus pretended to look at something through the window. He laughed, a breathy, soft laugh, looking at the others. "All of you knew?"

Sirius grinned, and cast a sideways look at Remus. "Well, Moony just lost the bet and owes me five galleons. I think he may need to lie down for a moment while we're here anyway."

"I was neutral," Peter informed him, but James ignored it.

"Damn, you should have told me! If I had known you were okay with it," he said, but had to stop halfway through his sentence by Sirius, who hugged him. A relief washed over him, seemingly out of nowhere, as if he could breathe freely for the first time in a long while. It felt good. It felt safe and warm and back to how things were supposed to be.

"Of course I'm okay with it." Sirius took a step back, and grinned, ruffling him through his hair. Then his smile fell, and he pointed a finger towards Snape. "That, however, I'm not okay with."

Chapter 8

Severus was allowed to return to his dorm that night, yet he felt more exhausted than he had all week. There were a handful of people who noticed his return, even greeted him, but he walked straight past them, until he could slip out of his clothes and into his bed.

If he were honest, he had expected to cry. During the past few hours, he had fought to keep his thoughts directed on unimportant matters, but he hadn't been able to suppress the heaviness that had settled on his chest. Now that he lay in bed, it weighed him down even more. His throat felt tight and his blood felt like lead, but he didn't cry. He just lied there, staring blankly ahead of him.

What had he expected? Not much, no. But he had wished it could have been different. Merlin knew he still did.

The night took forever to pass. His eyes hurt when he blinked, and all the sounds of his sleeping dormmates grated on his nerves. A part of him was relieved when the morning came, yet a far greater part of him was terrified.

He skipped breakfast, skipped coming down altogether. The showers were nearly empty when he entered. He usually spent as little time there as he could, far too self-conscious to face others. Cleaning charms did the most important job. Sure, they left his hair greasy and his skin oily, but it was clean nonetheless. He stared at himself in the fogged mirror for a moment longer. It came down to a choice between showering and breakfast, and he was already undressing.

If it were History of Magic, or even Charms, he would have skipped his morning class. Unfortunately, his day started with Transfiguration. There was no escaping Mrs McGonagall, but at least Lily awaited him down the corridor that lead to the Slytherin Common Room. She was lightly flustered, as though she had just yelled. He forgot sometimes that this was still a hostile environment to her, so to speak. She said nothing about it, so neither did he. He was relieved when, after mumbling that he did sleep well, she took to chattering about what he had missed in Transfiguration, and he could tune out the words and just listen to the pleasant buzz of her voice.

They were just in time for the class to start. He stared hard at their usual, empty places as they made their way to the front. It was, in a way, worse not to hear the usual muffled comments. He could feel their eyes on him. McGonagall wasted no time on informing him on which chapters he was to study on his own, and when he would have to catch up on his test. Tomorrow, after classes. Lily gave him an encouraging smile. He wished that he had paid attention to what she had said on their way there; at least he would have known what exactly he would be doing.

"Mr Potter," McGonagall suddenly said. "I expect you there at the same hour, tomorrow evening, for practice and evaluation."

He stiffened. Potter answered, but Severus channelled out his voice and read the title of the chapter they were on several times without registering a word. He couldn't ease anymore throughout the rest of the class, casting failed spell after failed spell, and reassuring Lily that she should focus on her own spells.

The rest of the day was no better. It was ridiculous. Just a few weeks earlier, he would have given up anything to have what he had now. They left him alone. Completely, entirely alone. Except for

foul glances, which he only caught from the corner of his eye, they were virtually ignoring his existence. *Finally*.

Except it was far worse now. He couldn't understand why it stung him so much to see how badly Potter wasn't looking at him. Why did he anticipate hearing his name – even the annoying variation son it? Why did he hold his breath every time they passed in the hallways, expecting jeers and maybe even a hex? And moreover, why was he so disappointed those never came?

"Don't worry," Lily reassured him, gently squeezing his arm. "I think they've finally stepped back for good."

He almost barked a laugh. There must be something awfully wrong with him, because he had never felt as nauseous as then. Had they really stepped back for good?

But they were, in the end, still the same people, weren't they? They would soon get bored of treating him like a regular human being. He just had to wait. Because that was what set them off, wasn't it? Just his existence? So, all he had to do was be there, and they would come at him sooner or later. Right?

He found himself thinking of ways to be more present around them. Raising his hand in class. Interrupting their answers when they spoke in class. The entirety of Potions class, where Lily and he had a seat right in front of them. He even caught himself going through old scenarios – what had set them off? What had they always commented on? Was he supposed to stop washing his hair altogether? Because that was Black's all-time favourite insult. Or carry all his books in his arms? Potter loved shoving them out of his hands. Except Potter wouldn't even look at him now. He groaned, and shifted and turned in his bed all night, wondering just how mentally deranged he was becoming.

It was driving him up the wall, when the next day continued in the same fashion. Lily, sweet, innocent Lily, thought he was paranoid for the opposite. She thought he was certain they were planning something bigger, more dangerous. *If only!* he thought, and cringed at his own despair.

Potter was the worst, he decided. The very worst. First, he had made Severus out to be the scum of the earth for being gay, only to reveal he was no better. And then he had kissed Severus. A real kiss. Soft and warm and haunting Severus through his hazy dreams. Only to drop him afterwards, without a second thought, the moment things became real.

In the end, wasn't Severus the idiot? What had he thought, that someone like James Potter would ever like him? The best he could hope for was a sneer, and even that was unlikely now.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Lily startled him out of his thoughts, peeking over his shoulder as she stood behind him. He curled his lip at the fish and chips on his plate. He had no idea how an entire day had passed, or how he had ended up at the table for dinner. He shrugged, and looked up again, and as he did he caught the dirty looks and whispers that were going on around them. A little clumsily, he stood up, and motioned for the two of them to leave.

Lily gently touched his hand. "You're dreading the Remedial Transfiguration, aren't you?"

He didn't want to think about it, let alone talk about it. She already knew, however, and he wasn't capable of denying it anymore, so he just shrugged. Just then, they passed three of Lily's friends. They sent her questioning stares, and one of them spoke up. "Hey Lily, want to come watch the Quidditch Practice with us?"

"No, thanks," she said, without even looking up to them, and steadily walked on with Severus. He

felt their stares on their backs, and shivered. Sometimes he feared they were going to do something to him too, and Merlin knew girls had war strategies he wouldn't survive. Glancing at Lily, he wondered why she was suddenly so determined to spend time with him. Hadn't she been perfectly happy with them? She would probably be having the time of her life, watching hot guys and chattering with her friends. Instead, he had trapped her in his gloom. He didn't mean to make her feel bad for leaving him, but he knew it was a thing he did. At times he did it reflexively, because sometimes guilt tripping Lily into spending time with him was the only way he could get anyone to spend time with him.

He stopped, and two steps later, she stopped as well, and turned around to face him. "Something wrong, Sev?"

Sev. He swallowed. His voice was a lot sharper than he had meant for it to be, but he couldn't stand the thought of being pitied. "You don't *have* to keep hanging out with me, you know."

She quirked an eyebrow at him. "I know. I'm hanging out with you because I want to."

He stiffened. "Why would you?" he asked, and gestured vaguely at himself. "I'm no fun. You could be giggling with your friends or doing something, I don't know, something better than watching me skulk for no reason."

"Hey, you're not skulking for no reason. Potter and his clique are wankers, and I'm not going to let you deal with their bullshit on your own. That's what friends are for."

He softened at that, and repeated the last sentence a few times in his head. She smiled brightly, as though she had sensed his relief. "I'll walk with you to the Transfiguration classroom."

Ah, yes, of course. He had almost forgotten that he was supposed to be there in about five minutes. Another thing he suddenly remembered was that they would be passing one of Malfoy's favourite hangouts on their way there. Malfoy always hung out with the most outspoken of Slytherins, and he dreaded passing there with Lily. He realised, for the first time, that he was not dreading their commentary on him, but on Lily.

"Thanks," he mumbled, "But I'll- I can go alone. It's- you're- um,"

She squeezed his hand. "Alright. Give Potter my regards."

He froze, "Give him what now?"

She raised her fist, "My regards."

Right. He blinked. Lily's *regards* were a fist in the face. Not that he had ever attempted it, but Lily would, very rarely, succumb to a more physical approach. He had always preferred scratching, because a little acid on his nails would leave far worse marks than a black eye, but apparently that was unethical.

Malfoy and company were in fact hanging out just where he had expected them, and he received a few condescending stares. It was Lucius himself who called after him. "Hey, Severus, have a moment?"

He should say no. He had the excuse that he was already late for Transfiguration, but that meant nothing to them. Being called by them was not a question, it was an order. He halted, and turned to them, wishing he could make himself look more confident, but knowing they just saw him as the dirty, skinny, little boy he was. The half-blood.

Narcissa smiled, almost friendly. She and Lucius were the only ones out of them who were inclined to talk to him even when they didn't actually have to. "Long time no see, half-blood Prince."

"We heard you've been ill," Evan Rosier commented, voice perfectly neutral and expression perfectly blank.

"I was," he said. Why did his voice always sound like that when he was talking to them? He had practiced in front of his mirror, to his own embarrassment, but he knew he could pull off a voice just as smooth and cool as theirs. Only not in front of them, apparently.

Lucius spoke almost kindly when he inquired after Lily, going as far as to omit calling her a mudblood. "So, what's with that girl Evans? I thought you said she was bothering you?"

"Yeah," Rosier added. "It looked like you were finally getting rid of her, and now she's all over you again."

He swallowed. Alright, he might have said some rash things when he had been angry. Now, he couldn't shake off Lily's cheerful, green eyes, and the way she had said "*That's what friends do.*" He scratched the back of his neck. "Well, she- it's-"

"Severus," Lucius interrupted him, his voice almost purring. There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes. With a pang, he remembered that Lucius too knew he was gay. He clenched his jaw. Was everything just going to keep running in circles like this? "We know you're a clever bloke. Don't let her distract you from better things."

"Actually," he said hoarsely, "I was wondering, where were all of you had gone for the time I was in the Hospital Wing."

Narcissa laughed charmingly. "Oh, Severus, we're sorry. We didn't know you were lonely."

"You didn't come to me because you didn't *need* me," he muttered, wishing he could breathe more deeply, but as it was he was barely keeping his voice steady. "Lily visited me all the time, even if she didn't want anything from me. I'm only a clever bloke when you want something from me."

"Oh my," Lucius grinned, entirely amused. "She's rubbed off on you."

"The mud is infectious." Avery snarled. "How nasty."

Severus spun on his heel and hurried away, towards the Transfiguration classroom. They wouldn't throw any hexes at him, and they wouldn't call him any names. They were far more thorough with people they didn't approve of.

He rushed through the hallways, failing to notice the shadow waiting on him until it grabbed him by his arm and dragged him into an empty classroom. He yelped, and was shoved against a wall, heart hammering in his chest until he recognised Black's face.

"The fuck is wrong with you?" He hissed, his voice still a too high for his own liking.

"The fuck is wrong with *you*, poofter," Black barked back. "Listen, you better leave James alone, you hear me?"

Right. How could he possibly be allowed to forget about Potter for more than five minutes. He wished he had put some acid on his nails after all. "I have every intention of doing just so."

"You better," Black spat. "I don't know what you did to him back there, but now that he's not trapped with you, his eyes have opened, and he's disgusted with you. *Disgusted*. You should leave people alone, Snivellus. You're only damaging good people, and I'm talking about both James and Lily."

"Shut up," Severus hissed. His eyes were burning, but he blinked it away. Black let him go and Severus gave him a shove as he passed him.

He threw open the door to the Transfiguration classroom, and it banged against the other wall, echoing in the nearly empty room. One thin-lipped McGonagall stared at him as though he had called her a whore, and one Potter sat very straight and very still as though he wasn't even there.

"Mr Snape," McGonagall snapped, "Care to explain yourself?"

"I'm sorry," he snapped right back, shutting the door behind him as quietly as he could. His voice was much lower when he spoke again, knowing he wouldn't be able to run away from McGonagall. "It won't happen again."

"What won't happen again?" she asked sharply, "Being late, slamming my door, or speaking to me in that tone?"

He was tempted to do all sorts of things he would very heavily regret, but settled for taking a deep, shaky breath. "All of the above?"

"Sit down Mr Snape. I will practice with the two of you for thirty minutes and then I expect you to show me your progress." He nodded, and made his way to the front seat on the other side of the classroom, as far away from Potter as possible. He slowed down when he received a very hard glare from Mrs McGonagall. "How about you sit right here, next to Mr Potter."

They were still not looking at each other, not speaking to each other, and generally not acknowledging each other's presence. McGonagall narrowed her eyes at them, but began teaching nonetheless. "I will be going over human to animal transfiguration with you today." Severus blanched, quickly putting together what that would likely mean. McGonagall continued as though she didn't notice. "It works on the same principle as animagus magic does, meaning it is incredibly complicated and requires your full focus. Using the spell on someone else is still easier than transfiguring oneself. Moreover, there is a difference between deciding what animal you will transfigure someone else into, and transfiguring them into the animal they would become should they be an animagus."

"What's the difference?" Potter asked. His voice sounded oddly quiet. Severus stared hard at the chalkboard.

"An animagus is still closely linked to their human self. Even in animal shape, they can think almost as humans do. Say, for example, that you would transfigure me into a bird. My human sense of self and my way of thinking would be degraded to a more significant extent than it would be if you were to transfigure me into a cat."

Severus shivered. He was not good at transfiguration, he was stuck with only Potter as a partner, and this was serious magic. "What happens if the spell goes awry?"

She gave him a sharp look. "I will be overseeing this closely for just that reason. Usually, it just means only a limb is transformed. I am well-qualified for this, and I will have no problem transfiguring you back to yourself."

There was a moment of silence in which McGonagall waited for any other questions. Alas, the moment of doom had come. "Please, will the two of you stand up and face each other."

They stood up stiffly, and were still stubbornly not looking at each other as they took their place in front of Mrs McGonagall.

"Mr Potter, I know you are skilled in transfiguration, so if you would like to go first." In response, Potter merely hummed, and slowly raised his wand. No one moved for a few long seconds, until McGonagall pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm afraid you'll have to look at one another if you want to get anywhere today."

When they did, Severus felt as though the air had been knocked out of him. He remembered, far more clearly than he wanted to, how that face had smiled at him, and how those lips had brushed over his own. He also remembered the words that came not long after. That it had meant nothing, and who would ever snog someone like Severus in their sane minds.

"Mr Potter, Mr Snape" McGonagall said calmly, but tiredly. "Can you put aside your personal dislike for one another, for once?"

Then Potter inhaled sharply, and moved his wand briskly. Severus closed his eyes and flinched reflexively. When he opened his eyes, Potter gave him an indignant look. "I wasn't going to hit you or something." Then he looked away again and huffed. "Geez, act normal."

"I'd rather be smacked with a wand than have you maul me to death because you have the attention span of a goldfish." He spat before he could stop himself, and wiped his clammy hands on his robes.

McGonagall quickly interrupted them. "Boys, attention."

When the next ten minutes yielded no result, and neither Potter nor he had spoken another word to each other, McGonagall let out an exasperated sigh. "What's wrong this time?" she asked, seating herself at her desk. "You can put your wands down, I can tell we are getting nowhere like this. What happened between the two of you that rendered you completely incapable of transfiguring even a finger?"

Severus expected Potter to come up with some ridiculous story that McGonagall would half-heartedly believe, but he said nothing.

He was tired of it. Really, thoroughly tired of all of it. First Potter ridiculed him, then he nearly lost Lily, and while that had been fixed he was having a mental breakdown over not being bullied. Then there was still Malfoy and his gang, who could turn his own house against him with ease. And now, he was failing Transfiguration.

He briskly turned to McGonagall, who arched her eyebrows curiously. "Potter's gay."

Instantly, Potter was roused from his stupor. He whipped around to face him. "You're gay!" And then, unexpectedly, he cried, "Oh, fuck you!"

Without wasting another moment, he briskly turned around, and stormed out of the classroom. McGonagall rose to stop him, but he had already slammed the door shut behind him. Snape stood, unable to move. He could not fathom why Potter's eyes had been wet, or why his voice had sounded so frail.

Chapter 9

James' heart was racing in his chest. McGonagall was going to skin him for this, but as it was, that wasn't even the worst part. His legs moved of their own accord, although he had no idea where they were taking him. The empty hallways resonated with his shallow breathing and quick footsteps. All he knew was that he had to be far away from there.

He was grabbed unexpectedly by his arm, and dragged into an empty classroom. He threw a punch – in his defence, it was a reflex – and recognised Sirius the same moment his fist connected with the latter's jaw. The whole ordeal ensued into a cacophony of "*Ow!*"s and "*I'm sorry!*"s.

Finally, Sirius recomposed himself, opening and closing his mouth a few times to check whether his jaw was still fine. He gestured for James to enter the empty classroom and closed the door behind them. When he turned around to face him, he was still rubbing his jaw. "You can't hit me in the face, Prongs, I'm too pretty for that."

Hearing Sirius' joking voice soothed him. He rolled his shoulders, trying to lose the tension that had been growing there for the past few hours. "Sorry, I didn't know it was you. Besides, what are you even doing here?"

When his question was not immediately answered, he felt the tension crawling right back into his shoulders. Sirius licked his lips, and inhaled slowly, which he always did when he was thinking about how to phrase something the best way. He had been making that face a lot, lately. "I was worried about whether *he* was going to try anything funny on you."

Since the past few days, a shallow pain had settled in James' gut. He had been relieved that it was his gut – he wouldn't have known what to do if it were in his heart. But sometimes, when he thought about Snape, or when Sirius mentioned him, even now, the pain flared, and a sharp pang of it ran all the way through his chest as well.

He managed to roll his eyes. As long as he could keep this to himself, he wouldn't cause more trouble. "You don't need to worry about that anymore."

"I clearly do," Sirius replied readily. He arched his eyebrows, as though he was challenging him. "I've never seen you so wired."

James stiffened. So much for hiding it, then. But he couldn't help it, could he? It just drove him mad. It. Not just Snape. Everything. He swallowed and then huffed, trying too hard to sound casual. "I told you it was just- just a weird, I don't know, *thing*, that happened," he tried to explain, gesturing vaguely. "I don't want anything to do with him anymore."

There was a moment of silence, which grated on James' nerves far worse than anything Sirius could have said. The seconds were loaded with unspoken words and unthinkable thoughts. It took

everything from James not to look away from his friend's piercing eyes. They were boring through him, deep and dark and frighteningly intense. He thought that, maybe, Sirius could hear his heart, and every loud and painful beat resonating in his chest. Or maybe he could see the smallest of his thoughts, fluttering back to that one memory, again and again. That one kiss.

Sirius shook his head and looked away. James could breathe again. He had the distinct sensation that he had failed yet another test today. In a swift move, Sirius pulled out an old, creaky chair for him, and then one for himself. Much against James' will, they sat down.

If he were honest, he just wanted to go. There was nothing he would rather do than forget this whole evening, or all of the past few days. It didn't have to be any more difficult than it already was, but of course, it was bound to go wrong anyway.

When Sirius spoke, the loudness and clarity of his voice startled James. "I'm not sure you don't want anything to do with him, and that's what worries me."

James crossed his arms petulantly, and shrugged. It was one thing to be gay, but something entirely different to like Snape. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"What I'm talking about?" Sirius snapped. "I'm talking about how you've barely eaten for the past few days. You've got bags under your eyes, and your hair looks like a mess. Whenever Snape walks into the classroom you look like you've stopped breathing. You've missed an entire Potions class staring at the back of his head. You think I didn't notice?"

Another silence followed, even harsher than the previous one. This time, James couldn't meet his eyes. The seconds took forever to pass. He willed himself to answer, to deny, but his thoughts couldn't scrape together a decent sentence.

Sirius sighed, and leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his face and sighed again. "I'm just worried about you, okay?"

James was sorry. He was so very sorry for being an idiot, and getting himself involved in something so complicated, with someone so wrong. Or maybe the 'something' was wrong, and Snape was complicated. He didn't know. He just wanted to stop thinking.

Much as it unnerved him, at least Sirius would talk to him about it. He had all these plans or ideas, trying too hard to undo what could not be undone. He was trying to make James see Snape again in the same way, how they used to see him, but sometimes James felt as though he and Sirius were looking at someone else.

But at least Sirius was trying to help.

Remus kept his distance. He had defended himself, in not so many words, by explaining that his preferences may not be a choice, but Snape certainly was. A poor choice, too. It was wrong, it made James wrong, to suddenly like someone he had hated for so long. How could he spit in Snape's face for years, and then suddenly want to kiss them? Was James just going through a weird phase, or was he thoroughly off his rocker? What was *wrong* with him?

Sirius said that Remus just didn't understand. That he was too careful when it came to love and relationships, too afraid to even try to understand it. Maybe he was afraid of realising what he was missing out on. Remus was terrified of himself, of what he was capable of. He was convinced that some day, he would tear apart the people he loved. Where James was hot with anger and desire, Remus was cool, always keeping people at arm's length. James didn't understand how he could live like that, how he could even call it living. Maybe Remus thought the same about him.

Peter said nothing, but he saw everything. His beady eyes would follow James' movements closely, would catch his stares and his stuttering before anyone else. Peter had always been the sweetest, out of the four of them. He was the best listener, had the warmest smile and the most catching laugh. It was hard not to notice that, lately, none of those smiles had been directed towards James. Not the genuine ones, at least. He had received the hesitating ones, the cold ones, but most of all, he had seen how indifferent Peter could really be.

Sirius said that he was jealous, and if not jealous, sensitive. Peter noticed everything, and he thought the world revolved around him. Every little gesture had to contain some kind of secret message to him. That's what Sirius said. If James were honest, he knew that if anyone thought the world revolved around themselves, it was Sirius and himself. He also knew he had never gotten along as smoothly with Peter as Sirius or Remus had. There just wasn't place enough for everyone, in James' little world.

And now they were falling apart.

"I'm sorry."

Sirius leant forward, squeezing his shoulder. When James looked up, he wished he hadn't. There was something in Sirius' expression that he had never seen there before – not towards him. Pity. He could have handled Sirius' anger, or sadness, or even disappointment, but not this piteous frown.

"Listen," he said, calmly and kindly, and James wished he would just yell. "You can get through this, okay? You and I both know that this is just a fling, or whatever. You are a million times better than him."

James laughed, but it lacked any joy. "I really don't think I'm that much better than anyone else."

"Alright," Sirius said gently, "You're only a thousand times better." He forced a little smile, and James returned one just as forced. At least they were trying. "But still, James, look at the facts. He's a Slytherin, and you're a Gryffindor. That's just bound to go awry."

If there was one argument that James had dismantled again and again over the past few days, it was that one. It was the most obvious one, but also the most easily disproved one. "Lily gets along with him just fine."

"Unfortunately," Sirius muttered. "Besides, Snape doesn't have the kind of background you want to be associated with. This may sound crude, but he's dirt poor. That, or he's the greediest kid in all of Britain. Have you seen what he wears? I'm surprised his cloak hasn't fallen apart in the middle of class yet."

James shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Yeah, it didn't help that I threw his bag and stuff in the lake, did it?"

Sirius shrugged, as if that were just a mild inconvenience. "He got new ones already, didn't you see? They're worse, but that just proves my point."

Trying to make Sirius feel sorry for Snape was as impossible as James had expected, but he had not expected it to be so frustrating. On the other hand, he knew all too well why Sirius thought that way, because not long ago he had been just like that too. He rubbed his eyes tiredly. "Honestly, I'm rich enough to afford not caring about anyone else's wealth. If Lily was poor, you wouldn't say a thing."

"But she isn't," Sirius stressed, "And you know what? Being poor comes with its own mentality. Lily wouldn't be entirely Lily if she were poor."

Being spoiled and rich clearly also came with a mentality of its own, James thought, but he knew that he too fell snugly into that category. "It's not like he can help being poor, can he? That's not his fault."

"Yes," Sirius admitted, but not convincingly, "But it *is* something to keep in mind." He paused for a moment, and licked his lips. "Look, I'm not telling you to shun him. I'm telling you why he's ill-suited for a rich kid like you, in many ways. Even if we ignore his wealth, or the lack thereof, there's still plenty of other things wrong about him. Did you notice no one ever heard of his parents? Some students call him the Half-blood Prince, so is he a half-blood? Is he a Prince? I don't think he's related to the Prince family. We used to dine at the Prince's House, and they had a family tree, and guess who was definitely not on there? Some bloke named Snape."

James snorted, and shook his head. "I think you, of all people, would know that they scratch of family members who betray them for muggles. So, considering that, isn't it perfectly possible that some Prince fell in love with some muggle called Snape? Then they would have gotten ripped out of the family tree, and might have become dirt poor because they suddenly had no money and place to go. It matches up, doesn't it?"

He was a little surprised with his conclusion himself. He had never really cared to think about Snape's family because, indeed, they didn't seem to be worth mentioning. Slughorn would have known if they were, but Snape was never there at those parties.

Meanwhile, Sirius huffed and rolled his eyes. It would be ridiculous if he didn't know how family trees were *adjusted* to current events. It was harsh, but the two of them knew very well that sooner or later, Sirius would be stripped off of everything as well – everything but his last name.

Still, Sirius wouldn't be James' friend if he wasn't at least half as stubborn, so he crossed his arms and continued. "Fine. Either way, there's plenty more. I don't think there's anything about his appearance that I need to state explicitly, but you should know it's definitely on the list of reasons why Snape is a problem."

"That's shallow, even for you." James interrupted him, feeling a twinge of hypocrisy.

"I know," Sirius said, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, "But he doesn't have the personality to make up for it, does he? He's always angry."

"Who wouldn't be if they were humiliated all they time? Humiliated by us, mind."

"He's rude."

"We're the ones calling him Snivellus!"

"Alright, whatever, but even if we leave us out of the equation, he has no good sides."

James huffed, digging through his mind for the first best thing he could think of. "He's intelligent."

"Intelligent?" Sirius repeated indignantly. "You mean intelligent as in 'has a knack for the Dark Arts and lying'? Because in that case, yeah, I suppose he is."

James was growing more tired of this argument with every word. "First of all, he's better at Potions than at Dark Arts, and secondly, he's really not that good of a liar."

Their argument ended then, because Sirius stood up abruptly and sighed exasperatedly. He hid his face behind his hands and shook his head slowly, before spreading his fingers and looking at James through them. "Listen, I'm not going to convince you why you shouldn't date Snape. Your common sense should do that for you."

James slumped in his chair. Hadn't he told himself to stop being so difficult about this? Then why was he jumping to Snape's defence now? He supposed he was defending himself in a way too, but he was too tired to believe much of that. He just wanted this to be over.

Whilst James was having another minor bout of self-depreciation, Sirius had begun pacing in circles. This continued for a short while, until he suddenly froze, and stared pointedly at James, who quirked an eyebrow. "You know what?" he said slowly, "You should date Snape."

James jumped in his chair. "Are you mad?"

A smile cracked through Sirius' face, and for a moment James thought he was indeed just having a laugh. There was no joking tone in Sirius' voice when he explained himself though. "No, I actually mean it. You should date him. That way you can see for yourself what it's like."

A frown slowly settled between James' eyebrows. "Sirius, I'm not going to date him."

"And why not?" he asked, and his face became soft again. At least it seemed more concerned than pitiful now. "You're so upset about all of this, James. I just want the best for you."

There was a brief pause before James answered. This sounded like a dangerous idea, and that meant a lot, coming from him. Ignoring the sharp beating of his heart, he said, "You really think dating Snape is what's best for me? I don't know which one of us is dealing with this worse."

Sirius barked a laugh, but for some reason he only seemed more convinced of his idea. This plan had clearly already worked itself out in his mind. "It's not that complicated. If Snape turns out to be your Prince Charming, you have my blessing. Otherwise, I'm going to tattoo *I Told You So* on my chest, and you'll get a matching *He Told Me So*."

James felt a smile tugging at his lips. He bit his lip hard. "Really?" he said, relieved when his voice didn't sound as excited as he feared it might.

"Aw, Prongs, you know I would do anything for you. You're my best everything," he said, pulling James out of his chair and into a tight hug. "Just promise me one – oh god James stop crying you precious fool – promise me one thing."

"I'm not crying," James protested, furiously blinking away his tears. He pulled away. "What do I have to promise?"

Sirius grabbed James' head with both his hands, staring intensely in his eyes. James had the weird feeling he might be either headbutted or kissed any moment. Sirius was blissfully unaware of these thoughts.

"No matter how much you like Snape, or anyone else, I can still be your best everything, right?"

"You *are* my best everything!" James cried out, pulling him into another hug. "I wouldn't dream of replacing you, Padfoot."

They held each other tightly for a moment, and James quietly realised that maybe Sirius was afraid too. Maybe he thought that one day James was going to fall in love and leave him behind. It sounded ridiculous to him, and yet he was painfully aware of how quickly and unexpectedly things

could change. If Sirius didn't have him, who else did he have? They were two of the same kind. Neither Peter nor Remus could do what they did, could mean the same to them. And while James had his family, had a home, Sirius had nowhere else to go.

They let go of each other, and Sirius patted him on the back before James could say anything more. He grinned, and gestured towards the door. "Now go back into that classroom and do your thing."

It was all good and well, up until James was actually standing in front of that door again. He remembered, quite vividly, that he had slammed the door behind him, and that McGonagall was going to skin him alive. That was, unfortunately, still not the worst part. What was he going to do with Snape? How could he fix things between them? What if Snape didn't want any fixing anymore? He worried the inside of his cheek, one hand ghosting over the door handle, when the door was sharply opened.

"Care to join us again, Mr Potter?" Mrs McGonagall said sternly, but there was something not unkind about her expression. Oh, sweet, sweet McGonagall, she had a soft spot for him.

"I want to apologise," he blurted out, before he could change his mind about this. "To you," he begun, and then slowly turned his head to Snape, who was still sitting in the front seat, alone, his back turned to them. "And to you, Snape."

McGonagall stepped aside to let him in, but Snape remained frozen. Before he could answer, if he was going to answer at all, McGonagall spoke again. "I think you boys can work out whatever issues you have after you have completed this class. May I remind you that you could both use a good grade in Transfiguration?"

James had, of course, completely forgotten that there was actual work that needed to be done. He was lucky, however, because if there was one thing he could, it was human to animal transfiguration. They were, once again, standing across from each other in front of the empty classroom. James had the first turn.

It was hard to imagine what sort of animal Snape could be. He didn't think he would try a bat, because it would be insulting, he supposed. Technically, he didn't have to know, but he wanted to. "Do you already know what animal you would turn into? Or do you have any, um, preferences?"

"No," Snape answered curtly. Although he was facing him, he seemed to be looking straight through him.

He took a moment to just stare at Snape, now that he could do it so openly. The same lank hair, the same black eyes, the same hooked nose. Snape was really not that attractive. His eyes swept over Severus' mouth. He suppressed a shiver and licked his lips. Okay, maybe he was somewhat attracted to him. He cleared his throat and blinked a few times. "Can you summon a Patronus? What shape does it take?"

"I can't," Snape answered, but a faint blush tinted his cheeks. *Bad liar*, James thought, but he didn't say anything.

After a few failed attempts, James had been able to give Snape a fox' tail, which hadn't looked that bad, but the cat-arm was definitely uncomfortable looking, and he had been glad when McGonagall had fixed that. He couldn't help feeling a hint of relief when Snape wouldn't take the proper form of a dog either. And then, almost unexpectedly, his human to bird transfiguration went smoothly. The difference was palpable; Snape's body accepted this transformation, and the magic flowed far more easily than it had before. James recognised the feeling all too well – it took a bit of guessing, but becoming a stag had felt like slipping into an old, comfortable shoe.

A raven. He should have guessed, really.

Chapter 10

He should have said no.

He should have told Potter just exactly what he thought about him. Not the undeservingly handsome part, of course, or that thing he did when he was trying to sound cool, but ended up blurting out everything, and blushing like some nervous first-year.

Of course, the mere fact that he was sitting up straight in bed, glaring at his drawn curtains, and thinking angrily of *should-have's*, said enough. It was not his fault for giving in, or so he firmly believed. Potter had just completely thrown him off. As if Severus could have ever prepared himself for something he had believed to be impossible.

Now they were *something more*.

That's what Potter had said. After he had said sorry, that was. And then he had first mumbled about some nonsense, explaining that "things changed" or something vague like that. Severus' heart had been hammering in his chest, much like it was starting to do again now, at the mere memory of it. Then, finally, just as Severus had wanted to turn around and get away as fast as he could – without forgiving Potter, of course – the twat had had the gut to ask him whether, maybe, they could be "well, you know, something more?".

And Severus, poor fool, had been caught completely off guard. He hadn't been able to breathe, had felt his face heating up, until finally he had croaked "Whatever."

Obviously, he had meant it as a no. Anyone could have told, right? But not Potter, no, Potter had been beaming. It was becoming increasingly hard to think straight at that point, so Severus had taken it as an opportunity to escape.

Now he sat in his bed, clutching angrily onto his blanket and shifting every few minutes. A part of him wanted to sneak out of bed, but he knew he'd get caught, and he hadn't the patience to deal with that. His face was burning once again. He was so angry with himself. Why couldn't he stick to hating Potter?

The night gave way to the morning, and in the same way, anger gave way to fear. Severus skipped breakfast, which was becoming an unhealthy habit. He wasted ten minutes deciding on whether or not he should shower. The mere fact that he was thinking *would Potter notice?* drove him up the wall. Why the fuck would it matter if he noticed?

For such an agitating night, and such a rigid morning, the rest of the day passed surprisingly smoothly. Neither he nor Potter acknowledged each other's existence. This time, it was a relief. Maybe Potter had changed his mind. Maybe it had all been a weird dream. Maybe Severus had misunderstood the situation completely.

It was lunch break when he was startled by Potter. The latter had approached him from behind, whilst they were making their way out of the Great Hall, and had done no more than push a note into his hand. Severus clenched his hand around it, and pretended it hadn't happened. Once he was sure no one was paying him any attention, and he was in no one's way, he unfolded the paper.

Meet me behind the Greenhouse in 5 min

Severus huffed at the paper. He rolled it into a ball in the palm of his hand. He ought to burn it, as anyone knew you ought to do with private notes, but after a moment of hesitation he shoved it to the bottom of his bag.

The note was an insult, that was what it was. As if Severus was stupid. As if he was some pathetic, lovesick, little boy, whose cognitive functions shut down at any sign from their crush. If he went to the Greenhouse in 5 minutes, four Gryffindors would have a good laugh at him, and that was probably the best-case scenario.

He huffed again, looking around for something to distract him with, when he noticed Malfoy and his gang a little further down the hallway. He swallowed, and turned his head down quickly, but they hadn't noticed him – not out loud, at least.

The clock was ticking. He didn't even know how many minutes had already gone by. Stupid Potter, thinking he was so much cleverer than him. Severus held his bag tight against him. Maybe he was there now, behind the Greenhouse. Giggling with his friends. Maybe he was alone. Severus felt the anger bubble again. *Damn it, damn him, damn that bloody idiot*, Severus thought, knowing very well where he was headed.

Potter was behind the Greenhouse, seemingly alone. He was fiddling with his sleeves and staring at some flower before he heard Severus approaching. Severus had his wand in his hand, and his jaw clenched, knowing that he was stepping into the lion's den but knowing he would be just as damned if he didn't. Potter straightened up and smiled thinly.

"You came," he said, sounding surprised.

The smart choice would have been to turn around, to run, to flee. He still had a chance. Whatever was here was no good for him. Severus crossed his arms, inhaling the scent of moist soil. It felt too natural to be where he knew he shouldn't be. "Where are they?"

Potter blinked. "They?"

"I'm not stupid."

There was no immediate reply to that. Potter glanced him up and down. Severus wondered if he should have showered after all, and then vowed he would never shower again if this train of thought would keep up. Then Potter looked around, very quickly, as though there might be a they here he had not thought about. And then it hit him. "You thought this was a set-up?"

Somehow, that only made it worse. The absence of the other three was suddenly much less bearable than if they had been here. Severus' eyes darted around, almost hoping to catch a glimpse of them. But no, it was just the two of them. His mouth became very dry.

"I just wanted to, um, talk."

"Talk?" Severus scoffed. "I don't need to talk with you."

Ignoring him completely, Potter continued. "I've just been thinking, you know, and I thought, maybe it would be nice if we could try this, if you know what I mean?"

Severus stood frozen, stubbornly not looking at Potter and fiercely pretending he hadn't heard what he had just heard. His voice was not quite as steady as he had wanted it to be when he replied. "I don't know what you mean."

Potter scratched the back of his neck. His mouth worked, and he licked his lips several times, as

though there were all sorts of things he wanted to say, but none out loud. Finally, he took a deep breath, and said, "I'm bad at this whole talking thing."

Before Severus could remark on that, Potter took a step forwards, and for God knows what reason Severus didn't step back. Then Potter's warm hands were on his cheeks, cupping him gently, and they were much too close for Severus to be able to breathe.

Severus jammed his finger into Potter's chest, leaning his head back when the other tried to kiss him. They stopped, staring at each other from way to close, and Severus tried hard to keep his voice from sounding so high and nervous. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Kissing you?"

"Why the hell would you do that?"

Potter frowned, and leaned back a little. "Because I want to?" he tried, as if he was guessing the answer. "Don't you?"

Severus was taken aback by the question. His eyes, inevitably, stole a glance at Potter's lips. He simultaneously blushed furiously and scowled. "I don't," he said stiffly. He took another step back and clutched his bag to his chest with his sweaty hands.

"Oh." Potter sounded far sadder than he had any right to. For a few seconds, he was staring at the ground between them, before raising his eyes again. His voice sounded just a little hopeful when he asked, "Not yet?"

Severus didn't move. "Why do you want this?"

Potter shrugged. "Because it feels good."

Something in Severus snapped. "You've hated me for years, and now suddenly you want to make out behind the Greenhouse? You think I'm just going to go along with every one of your impulses? What if you think pushing me off the Astronomy Tower would feel good next?"

Potter stiffened. "It's not like that," he sputtered defensively. "I just like picking a fight and you're always so, I don't know,"

"I'm an easy target?" Severus interrupted him sharply. "Is that what you're saying? And now you think I must be so desperate I'll be an easy fuck too?"

"That's not at all what I'm thinking," James snapped, but no more arguments came forth, so he had to retreat to stubbornly shaking his head while Severus gave him an accusing stare.

"You're the worst, Potter," he hissed, "You're a pathetic and selfish-"

He abruptly froze when Potter grabbed both his shoulders, inhaled sharply, and blurted out, "I just can't stop thinking about you."

Severus opened his mouth to yell at him, but the words echoed in his head, losing sense as they gained meaning. Immediately, his cheeks flustered. He tried to brush it off, but all that came out was a shaky huff. He swallowed hard, his mouth still dry. "Whatever."

Potter bit his lip, awkwardly removing his hands from Severus' shoulders. "So, um, what about you? You want to try this, or, um, not?"

Severus shrugged as violently as one could shrug, as if he was trying to shout through his shoulders, and made a motion with his head that was both half a shake and half a nod. His body had a plan of embarrassing him to death, apparently.

"You threw my stuff in the lake," he croaked, wincing at the weakness of his voice.

"I'm sorry," Potter immediately replied. "I'll get you new stuff. It was your Charms textbook, wasn't it?"

"Charms and Transfiguration," Severus lied. Hell, even if this would turn into nothing, he wasn't going to deny himself new books. Besides, Potter was *supposed* to get him those, considering that he was the one who had rendered them worthless. "And parchment. And a quill."

"No problem."

Of course it was no problem to Mr My-Parents-Are-Rich. Severus huffed.

"Anything else?"

Now he was just pushing it. Severus snapped, "You think you can make things up by buying me stuff? That's pathetic, even for you."

The truth was that Severus would most definitely not mind exploiting Potter. As much as he hated it, Potter could buy him a whole new set of robes and all his school books, and he wouldn't even feel the difference. Meanwhile Severus had borrowed a quill from Lily because he was unwilling to spend half a galleon on a proper one. It was unfair, and it hurt, and therefore it was fine if he pinched a book more out of Potter than he needed to.

But he couldn't really exploit Potter. That wouldn't come for free, and he was afraid of what price Potter might name to pay him in return. Besides, if someone else ever figured out that Potter was buying him stuff, he was going to dig himself a grave and bury himself alive in shame.

Luckily, Potter was completely oblivious to Severus' inner struggle. "Listen, I know I messed up, I mess up a lot. I did stupid shit, and I, and you didn't deserve it, I know that," he rambled, and his voice sounded almost soft. "I just, I want to make up for it, at least some of it, as good as I can."

Severus stared at the large leaves of ivy that crept down the wall. "Whatever," he said, and it finally sounded like he meant it.

"I'm serious," Potter protested. "I'll prove it to you."

Severus slowly turned around and left. "Good luck."

Luck, of course was not what Potter needed. Potter already had everything he needed: Stubbornness and money. But those weren't going to convince Severus. He stepped away more briskly once he had escaped the moist air around the Greenhouse. He glanced over his shoulder only once, relieved when Potter hadn't tried to follow him.

Just when he turned his head back around, he walked straight into someone's chest. At this point, Severus could recognise Black by his cologne alone. He stepped back and snarled, "What do you want?"

Black looked at him sharply. Severus swallowed. He knew.

After the initial thought, which came with a sort of blankness, the panic kicked in. This was it. This

was the end of him. He pressed his bag more tightly to his chest. Black narrowed his eyes. They would dig up Severus' dead body from the lake, and Dumbledore would probably pat Black on the head for it too.

"Listen, Snape," he said in a low voice, "You better watch your step."

Severus straightened himself, although he knew he still was a whole head shorter than Black. His voice sounded sharp, just a tad too rushed. "The fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm saying that if you try anything funny with James, I'm going to," he paused then, and Severus raised his eyebrows in a challenge. Black's eyes flickered to some place behind them. Severus glanced over his shoulder, hoping to see a teacher, or even some wandering student, but there was only a tree – the Whomping Willow.

"Going to what?" he snapped, but Black didn't say anything. Severus puffed up his chest. "You want to know something? It's *Potter* who wants to kiss *me*." Black flinched at the words. "You saw it with your own two eyes, didn't you? So why don't you go talk to *him* about this bullshit, huh?"

"I know who I need to talk to," Black said warningly. "But if you hurt him—"

"Hurt him?" Snape snapped. He didn't understand. He was completely at loss. Since when was he the one who hurt Potter? All he ever did was whine to teachers, and the two of them knew damn well that he was completely ignored.

Black took a step closer to him and put his finger against Severus' chest. "I'm watching you. You make one mistake, and I'll know, and I'll make sure you'll never forget just how worthless you are." His eyes flickered to the place behind Severus again, the Whomping Willow, or perhaps the Forbidden Forest behind it.

Severus huffed, but said nothing. What could he say, when he didn't understand what the hell Black was going on about? He moved around him, holding his breath until he was a few steps away, and then sighed quietly in relief. Only then did he notice that his hands were shaking, and he swung his bag over his shoulder, hearing it tear just a little, and pushed his hands in his pockets. He walked so fast he was almost running, and his heart was still racing in his chest. He didn't realise where his feet were taking him until he was there, surrounded by the scent of books and the soft murmur of studious students.

"Can I talk to you for a moment," he asked Lily, his voice too loud and sharp. She glanced at her friends for a moment, excused herself, and followed him into a quiet corner.

"What's wrong?" she asked, frowning at him.

He rubbed his face, glad when he noticed his hands had stopped shaking. "Before I say anything, can I ask you something?"

A look of worry crossed Lily's face. "What's wrong?"

Severus worried his lip for a moment, and then glanced up. His voice was softer than he had intended it to be. "Purely hypothetically, if Potter ever hurt me badly, would you, um, do anything to him?"

Lily blinked in surprise, but then laughed, earning herself a few glares from other students. "Of course, Sev. I could set his bed on fire while he's still sleeping."

Severus couldn't help a little smile. Take that, Black. Potter wasn't the only one whose friend could make threats, and Lily's threat was a whole lot more real than whatever vague thing Black had been hinting at. Severus ran his finger over his lip. "It would be a pity if Black's bed caught it too, wouldn't it?"

Lily quirked an eyebrow. "Why exactly are you asking me- oh- oh my god, Sev, are you and James-"

"No," Severus hissed, looking around him frantically to see if anyone hadn't heard anything. "No, we, we're not, we don't,"

She put her hands on her hips. "What did he do?"

Severus felt a blush creeping up his face. "He didn't do anything, not really, I mean, he tried to, but, nothing happened."

A few seconds passed, in which Lily's sharp, green eyes pierced him. He shifted uncomfortably. Her mouth moved quietly, the words barely audible. "Oh my god. You're *disappointed*."

"No, *no*, I'm not. Do you hear me? I am *not* disappointed." His face heated up regardless of his words. Lily's mouth opened a little and she covered it with her hand. Severus shook his head furiously. "It's not like that. There's nothing going on. Stop looking at me like that."

"I never thought you would really," she left her sentence unfinished like that, still staring at him wide-eyed. "Oh my god."

"I'm not, it's not, not like *that*," he sputtered in frustration, gesturing vaguely as he did. People were staring. "You're thinking too much. Stop it."

"Oh my god."

"Lily, please."

"You *like* him."

Chapter 11

It was supposed to go slow – that's what James had heard. That's what everyone always said. Good relationships took their time. But this wasn't *that*, was it? This wasn't courting, or anything remotely close to it. This was clandestine, if he had to put it prettily, but otherwise he would call it a dirty or shameful or wrong. It was all of that, and he knew it all too well, except it didn't really feel that way. But it didn't really feel like it was more either.

He had tried to treat this differently, had tried to make this work like it might have, under different circumstances. But the circumstances were so that it was Snape, and because Snape was Snape, everything had to be a lot harder than he had initially thought.

For one, they ignored each other entirely during the day. He could not speak to Snape, not even look at him. He was terrified that even just as much as a glance towards him would give him away. Perhaps no one else would notice, but his friends would. Peter would. Because, lately, there was very little Peter *didn't* notice. Or maybe he had always been that way. What had not always been that way before, was a certain glint in his eyes; a sharp, peculiar stare that he sometimes held too long. As if, for the first time, it was Peter who had leverage over him. Because James had always been the star, together with Sirius. Handsome, clever, athletic. All things Peter came close to, but not close enough; not as close as James.

But Peter wasn't a poof.

Sirius, although reluctantly, provided him with excuses to escape during the night. There was no doubt that Sirius was just waiting for this to collapse onto itself, the way he looked at James, or perhaps it was the way he didn't look at him.

Sometimes, perhaps more often than he liked to admit, James thought he was anticipating that collapse too. The point where everything would fall apart on him – except he'd turn it so that it would fall apart on Snape, wouldn't he? And it made him feel bad; both the anticipation of the end and the knowledge it wouldn't be on him. At last, it would finally be over with. Everything would go back to normal after that. It had to.

Remus had the decency to pretend he didn't know where James went. He wouldn't ask, wouldn't even look up from the book he was reading or the homework he'd been doing. Not that Peter said anything, but he would stare, with an expression between curiosity and comprehension on his face. Peter was the only one who wasn't disgusted with this ordeal, but maybe that was only because James' "dirty little secret" meant Peter was the better one in this. Because James' fall somehow translated to Peter's rise.

Yet no matter how uncomfortable it was to leave them, he couldn't imagine not doing it. He could barely stand those nights in between as it was; the nights without sweaty hands and blind touches and teeth against his neck. He shivered at the mere thought of it, the mere thought of Snape.

They didn't speak, which James was grateful for, because what could he say? Yet, at the same time, it was in his nature to want an outlet for his emotions. The unsaid thoughts were left to tumble through his head. During the day, and even during the night, he weaved together Snape's responses himself. *My friends know*, he would say, but Snape gave a rat's ass about James' friends – he'd just want to know whether they could keep their traps shut. *Can you wash your hair for*

once? he would say, and Snape would answer with some scathing remark, until they would be yelling at each other. Then, the next time, he would either show up with the greasiest hair in the world, or not come at all. James knew he wouldn't be saying that one, but there were other things that were simultaneously much better and much worse than that. *I wish I didn't want you so badly*, he would say, and Snape would say nothing, because he had to be just as desperate as James was.

He stood there, where they had agreed to meet, weaving these little snippets of conversations together. By the time Snape had made his way over, his footsteps barely audible and a weak *lumos* wavering on the tip of his wand, James had already grown impatient. Words whirled through his head and his hands were itchy. Snape pushed open the door to the broom closet. James was on him in a heartbeat. The door closed behind them, and once they could forget the world around the broom closet, they did not bother to hide their want. Their hands rode up each other's shirts, their eyes always shut. James didn't shy away from admitting it: he liked the feeling of Snape. The nails dragging across his skin, the teeth catching in the kisses, the gooseflesh underneath his fingertips. But he didn't want to *see* it. It felt less like a memory, that way, more like a very intense dream. Not that there was much to see, most of the time, but sometimes there would be a torch or candle burning across from the door, and he would have to be careful about keeping his eyes shut. This time, however, they were lucky, and darkness immersed them.

He grabbed a fistful of Snape's hair – greasy, unwashed – and kissed him hard.

His other hand travelled down, palming the erection that tented Snape's pants. Snape didn't touch him, not yet. He was louder than James would have given him credit for. Not that he was really loud, but now, when his hips twitched and jerked, and his cock strained against the thin fabric that separated their skin, James could hear him far more clearly than he could feel him. There was something about Snape's voice – about the half-stifled moans, the dry swallows, the voiced gasps – that haunted him. It wormed itself into his head, where it stayed crisp and sharp in his memory, sending shivers down his spine for hours, sometimes days, after they met.

As things got more heated, Snape got louder. James moved eagerly, hungrily, waiting for the exact moment before Snape would bite his lip to stifle a moan, one that was loud and clear and made James shudder, but also made Snape so embarrassed he would not dare to make another sound anymore.

He licked Snape's bottom lip, catching a high sound, almost a whine, that couldn't be stilled. He caught Snape's bottom lip between his own teeth, and bit. Hard.

Snape cried out, and his whole body jerked against him, half in pain, half in arousal. James moved his hand away to curl his arm around Snape's back and pull him closer. They grinded against one another, frantically, and he briefly thought that they must look like rabbits. Like fucking animals.

He put one hand in Snape's neck and kissed him hard. Because animals didn't do that. He didn't know whether he wanted this to be just fucking. One moment he kept thinking they were just doing this because of their needs, hormones or whatever, and because of the convenience. They were just both unfortunate in their preferences, and this was the only way to get good relief on a regular basis. It was good enough, he supposed, yet that didn't explain why he kept trying to do these little things, as if drawing those whiny little sounds from Snape made it any less animalistic.

He fingered Snape's buttons, but couldn't be bothered with the effort. His impatience was followed by the sound of buttons ripping and clattering to the floor. Snape jumped. James couldn't see him, but he could hear his shallow breaths, his hoarse voice. "You better buy me a new one."

It was a little more upset than he had expected it to sound, but that didn't matter. James rather liked his voice, liked the thinly veiled emotions behind it better. Snape's face was always angry – but his

voice was thin and needy and frustrated. He grinned. "Alright."

"And while you're at it," Severus breathed, leaning in closer. "Buy yourself a new one too."

More buttons hitting the ground. They drew each other closer, chest against chest, and then Snape buried his head in the crook of James' neck, letting himself be pushed against the wall and grinded against.

They were too impatient to make it last. Too hungry and too needy. Dry humping each other until they were sweating and painfully erect in their pants. Finally, his hands fumbled Snape's belt loose. With a faint click, it opened, and slipped down his slim hips, pulling his pants down with it. James held this breath. His eyes darted down, but it was dark. He hated how badly he wanted to see, but luckily, for all he could make out of the darkness, he might as well be shagging Mulciber. But he could *feel* Snape, feel the weight of his hard cock in his hand. He stroked him almost lazily, maybe hesitantly, thinking too hard about not thinking about it. Snape bucked into his hand.

"Oh!"

Snape's nails were digging in his back, to the point where it hurt, and James shuddered with how unexpectedly good that felt. He shoved Snape against the wall, hearing another "*Oh!*", but this time it was one between surprise and pain and pleasure, and it sounded that much better.

Footsteps. A light. They both froze. Someone was pacing down the corridor, about to pass their door. Faint, white light crept through the space around the door, drawing white lines in the dusty air.

He knew he shouldn't, but he didn't think about it when he did it. He looked at Snape. There was just enough light for him to make out Snape's face. Sharp nose, greasy hair, mouth still parted and crooked teeth visible.

I kissed that mouth, he thought. He knew he should feel ashamed, and yet he felt, weird. Awake. As though the dream had ended, and he had woken up to find Snape in his arms. Snape. With his lank hair, that was for once messy because of how James' hands had run through it. With his shirt opened, several buttons missing, that revealed an almost hairless chest that rose and fell as quickly and quietly as his own. With two black eyes, that stared back at him intensely.

The footsteps faded, as did the light. The darkness settled again.

Neither moved. They stood quietly, listening intently to each other's breaths, which had suddenly become overwhelmingly loud in the absolute silence around them. They were waiting. On what, he couldn't tell. Snape's hand slowly slid down a little, from his side to his hip, the touch lightening as though he might pull away.

They could end this here.

He shut his eyes. Darkness. And yet he swore he could still see those black eyes, staring back at him. He remembered how they had looked at him in almost the same way once before. In the Hospital Wing. When he had cupped that same face gently, and had felt a wave of something like giddiness, but sharper, surging through him. When the threatening glare on Snape's face had petered out into surprise, and then into something a tad familiar – fear – and a whole lot more unfamiliar – *want*.

His hand rose, fingertips brushing over Snape's ribcage, up his collar bone, until he could carefully cup his face once more. He leaned in and was caught off guard when two hands reached back for

him and pulled him closer, and Severus' lips met him first.

His mouth was dry, and his tongue moved almost hesitantly. This kiss was different. Like it was his first kiss all over again, and he didn't know what went where and how fast and how much was too much. He drew Snape closer, catching the little, satisfied "hm" it drew from the latter. He grinned into the kiss.

Snape stiffened. "What?" he whispered snappishly into the kiss.

"Nothing," James mouthed against his lips, and then pressed another soft kiss against Snape's closed mouth. "I like your voice."

He felt his cheeks heating up at his words. Snape opened his mouth just a little to say something, but then turned his head away a little. James used to opportunity to make a path of light kisses over Snape's cheek, to his ear, where his tongue darted over Snape's earlobe before his teeth caught it.

Snape pulled away a little. "The hell are you doing?"

There was a natural hint of disdain to Snape's voice, but James thought he sounded a little confused as well. "Don't like it?"

A shrug. "You're breathing right into my ear."

James kissed Snape's neck. A long, wet kiss, his teeth caressing the gooseflesh underneath. Snape gave a small sigh of satisfaction. James pulled back. He had wanted to say something smug ("You like that better?") but Snape made a short, whiny noise that said more than enough. He grinned against Snape's neck, knowing the latter could feel it.

"Git."

He'd never heard that word said in such a breathy voice, and it didn't do anything to lessen his smile - or his erection, for that matter. His lips pressed another wet kiss against Snape's neck. His hand wandered back down, where it found Snape's cock still as eager as it had been before. With a few teasingly light touches, Snape's hips began to jerk impatiently. When he finally took his erection in his hand, he was rewarded with a throaty moan. He wanted to draw every little noise out of him so bad that it would make a cheap whore sound modest.

"Wait."

That breathy voice again. There was something nervous about it. Instead of letting go of his cock, he slowed the pace and loosened his grip. Snape swallowed.

"You, um, we, we're, well, we're always, you know," he whispered, then halted, as if annoying with his own stuttering. "We're always doing this."

James felt an unpleasant tingling running through his body. "What do you mean? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Snape muttered. "I just thought, maybe, we could, um, try something else."

His grip on Snape's cock tightened, drawing a sharp hiss from the latter. He leaned in a little closer, so that he could talk right into Snape's ear. His voice was low, and he couldn't hide his smirk. "What did you have in mind?" he asked, his hand moving painfully slowly over Snape's erection.

He couldn't see a thing, so when Snape moved, he had no idea what was going on. Suddenly, there

was no dick in his hand anymore, and no bare chest against his own, and no ear to purr in.

And then suddenly, there were two hands on his thighs and a breath hitting his cock. He let out a high, shaky sound of surprise.

He cupped Snape's cheek, ran his thumb over Snape's swollen, wet lips. He nearly came then and there. The image of Snape, one his mind had to weave together for lack of light, flooded his mind. A wave of heat rolled over him, so strong he shuddered and his hips jerked. With one hand, he held the back of Snape's head, and with his other hand, he grabbed his own cock. He felt the tell-tale flush creep up his cheeks. The familiar tight, hot sensation settled in his abdomen. Snape's flat tongue ran over the tip of his dick.

"Fuck, Snape, fuck."

He didn't know what he was trying to say. Snape leant forward hesitantly, lips touching the head of his cock, but James couldn't keep his hips from bucking. It was too much, too urgent. He bit his lip hard and shut his eyes so tightly he saw stars. Then Snape's hot mouth was around his dick. One thrust, two thrusts. He shuddered violently.

"Oh, fuck, Snape."

He leaned against the wall and slowly sat down, next to Snape, who was spitting out James' cum. That very thought sent an unexpected jolt of far too quickly reborn arousal through him. He took a moment to sit and catch his breathe and listen. With a little smile, he realised that despite the spitting and scraping of his throat, Snape had not stopped jerking himself off.

It took some fumbling in the dark, but then he found Snape's cock, and pushed the latter's hands away. Now that his head was too light to think, he found it very easy to enjoy having another man's dick in his hand. Nothing shameful about it. He ran his fingers over Snape's balls, and basked in the sounds it elicited.

Snape, clever as he was, had picked up quickly that James was in a generous state of mind. His bony fingers ran over his scalp, pushing his head down. James let himself be guided, and inhaled the musk, tangy air of someone else's crotch.

Sucking a bloke off was both better and worse than he had expected. Snape had sat down next to him, and he had held him by his hips, so that all the twitches of his hips were stilled. The taste was not particularly pleasant, but, Merlin, he'd take anything in his mouth to hear another moan so deep and loud. His cock gave an eager twitch, and he entertained the thought of a second round, when Snape's nails dug into his shoulders and he groaned deeply, from within his chest. James had, for some reason, completely forgotten that the male orgasm involved sperm, and found himself jerking back abruptly, coughing loudly.

"Shht! Be quiet!" Snape whispered. His voice was hoarse, and far too soft to convey any of the intended urgency, but he tried to make his point clear no less. "You're going to get us caught."

"It's your fault anyway," James chocked out, coughing loudly once more before he could finally breathe again. He realised that in the process of choking, he had completely missed out on what must have been a beautiful moan. After his initial reaction, which was silently cursing himself, he supposed the best solution was to repeat the experience sometime. It was a skill he was willing to work on.

They listened intently to the silence to make sure no one had heard them. When it was clear no one was coming their way, he relaxed. Snape was the first one to speak. He began almost casually, but

his typical, condescending tones quickly slipped in again. "I know I have no experience to back me up, but you know that the sucking part does not actually mean you have to inhale-"

"Oh shut it," he said, shoving him half-heartedly. Trust Snape to mock him instead of apologising. "I nearly died because of your dick."

Snape yawned, and slowly got up. "A worthy cause of death."

James barked a laugh, immediately shushed by a hand half-heartedly slapping him. He shook his head as he got up as well, and began putting his pants in place. They dressed in a pleasant silence, and the grin didn't leave his face. Who would have thought that Snape had it in him to joke? Perhaps he needed an orgasm to loosen up enough for it. Post-coital humour. Who would have thought.

"Hey, Snape," he said quietly, as he waited for the latter to finish fumbling with his belt. There was a low hum in response. "Are you, you know, going straight back to your dorm?"

A hesitant pause. "Why?"

He ran his tongue over his lips. "I'm kind of peckish," he said, trying to sound casual. He ran his hand through his hair and then scratched the back of his neck. "You could come with me to the kitchens, if you want to."

It was funny, how he had had Snape's cock in his mouth only moments ago, and now he was getting flustered about asking him for a snack afterwards. The response was something between a huff and a sigh; Snape was definitely rolling his eyes now. "You can't wait until the morning?"

James stretched, not feeling the least bit tired or sleepy. "I'm absolutely starving right now."

A huff. A laugh? A grin, probably. He tried to imagine Snape grinning; not at his expense, that was. There was a moment of silence in which he had the distinct impression Snape was making some face, but it was lost on him in the darkness. Finally, he said, "Why doesn't that surprise me."

It was as close to a yes as James was going to get. He smiled, and blindly reached for Snape's hand. It took a bit of fumbling, and he knew Snape's cheeks ought to be just as red as his own. There they were, standing in the middle of a completely dark corridor, holding hands, like a pair of idiots who had completely lost their minds. James' cheeks were hurting with how broad he was smiling.

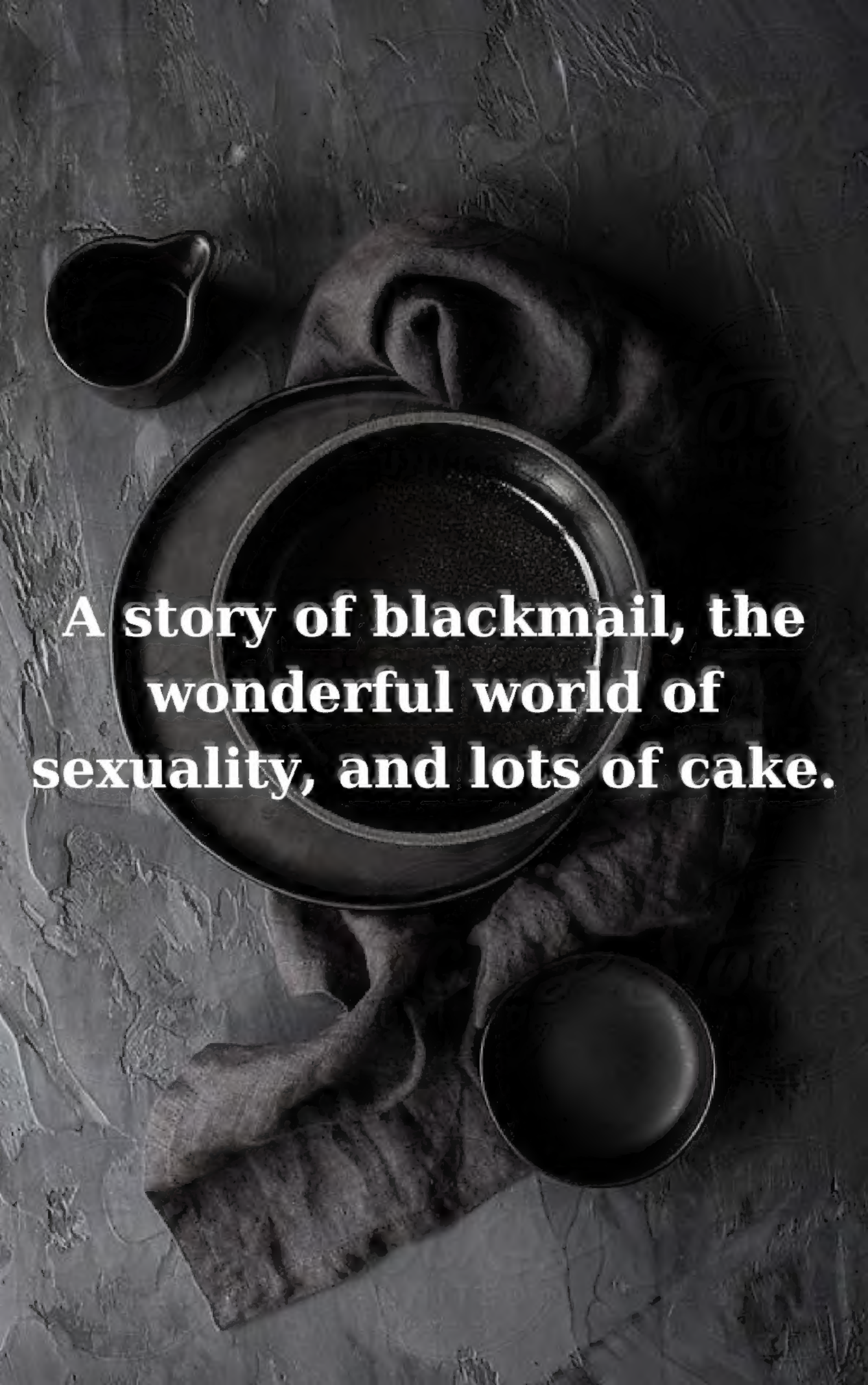
Romantic was not exactly the right word for it, but there was something exciting about wandering through the hallways of Hogwarts, hand in hand with Snape. Something that made his heart race and his cheeks flush. He had expected to receive a comment on how ridiculous it was – because it was. Impractical, too. But there was no snide remark or muttered complaint. He ran his thumb over the back of Snape's hand as they reached the secret entrance to the kitchens.

He let go of Snape, but only to wrap his arm around him instead. It was kind of like a date, he supposed. It was close enough. He kissed Snape's temple. Maybe they could squeeze in that second round after they ate as well.

"What do you want to eat?"

Snape turned to him and leaned in, their lips grazing each other before he pulled away, leaving James wanting. He felt Snape's grin against his own lips, heard the low purr in his voice as he replied.

“Cake, please.”



**A story of blackmail, the
wonderful world of
sexuality, and lots of cake.**